

LEGISLATION AND STATUTORY INTERPRETATION (LAW 266)

Spring 2023

- Instructor:** Nelson Lund
nlund@gmu.edu
- Office Hours:** Thursdays, 2:30-3:30
- Required Text:** William N. Eskridge, Philip P. Frickey, and Elizabeth Garrett, *Cases and Materials on Statutory Interpretation* (West, 2012), ISBN: 978-0-314-27818-0
- Course Description:** An introduction to the theory and practice of statutory interpretation.
- Learning Outcomes:** The American Bar Association requires that this syllabus describe what the ABA calls “learning outcomes.”¹ For this course, the learning outcomes include one that has been designated by the faculty: “Students will exercise the professional skills expected of members of the legal profession.”²
- Evaluation:** There will be an examination at the end of the course. Final grades may be raised or lowered to reflect the quality of class participation.

- Academic Regulation 4 has strict and specific rules about attendance, which I do not have the authority to waive. If you have questions or concerns about these rules, please contact the director of student academic affairs.
- Class discussions are educationally important, and they require coming to class prepared. For that reason, final grades may be raised or lowered to reflect the adequacy of class participation. If you are not prepared when called on, please say so rather than waste everyone’s time by trying to wing it.
- If you think I may not know how to pronounce your name, please send me an email with a phonetic spelling. If I mispronounce your name during class, please correct me.

¹https://www.americanbar.org/content/dam/aba/administrative/legal_education_and_admissions_to_the_bar/governancedocuments/2015_learning_outcomes_guidance.pdf.

² <https://www.law.gmu.edu/academics/degrees/jd/>.

- In order to encourage regular preparation and participation, the following policies will apply:
 - **No sound or video recording devices of any kind may be used during class.** This is partly to discourage inattentiveness, and partly to encourage participation by students who understandably don't relish the prospect of having their contributions immortalized on other people's recording devices.
 - When employing the Socratic method, I will call on students at random. That means that you may be called on in any given class, no matter how frequently or recently you've been called on before.
 - Everyone is expected to pay attention in class, *not just to my questions and comments but also to what other students are saying*, and to be ready to join the discussion. This is more important than taking extensive notes. Anyone who, when called on, seems not to have been paying attention will be marked down as unprepared.

ASSIGNMENTS

Class 1 – Tuesday, January 17 – The Civil Rights Act of 1964

Eskridge, Frickey, & Garrett, pp. 2-48

Class 2 – Tuesday, January 24 – Interpretations of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964

Griggs v. Duke Power Co., 401 U.S. 424 (1971), which is attached to this syllabus at pp. 7-12.

Eskridge, Frickey, & Garrett, pp. 79-115

Along with the excerpts from the *Weber* case on pp. 85-98 of the casebook, please read the text of § 703(i) of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which is attached to this syllabus at p. 13.

Class 3 – Tuesday, January 31 – Interpretations of Title VII and Introduction to Interpretive Theory

Eskridge, Frickey, & Garrett, pp. 115-58

Along with the editors' note on pp. 125-29 of the casebook, please read the excerpts from the Civil Rights Act of 1991 that are attached to this syllabus at p. 14.

Along with the excerpts from *Holy Trinity* on pp. 142-46 of the casebook, please read the full text of the statute at issue in the case, which is attached to this syllabus at pp. 15-16.

Class 4 – Tuesday, February 7 – Statutory Coherence

Public Citizen v. U.S. Dep't of Justice, 491 U.S. 440 (1989), excerpts attached to this syllabus at pp. 17-30.

Eskridge, Frickey, & Garrett, pp. 168-76, 197-212

Class 5 – Tuesday, February 14 – The “New Textualism”

Eskridge, Frickey, & Garrett, pp. 214-32, 242-52, 261-75

Class 6 – Tuesday, February 21 – Textual Canons

Eskridge, Frickey, & Garrett, pp. 326-62

Yates v. United States, 135 S. Ct. 1074 (2015), excerpts attached to this syllabus at pp. 31-47.

Class 7 – Tuesday, February 28 – Substantive Canons

Eskridge, Frickey, & Garrett, pp. 362-87, 391-404

Class 8 – Tuesday, March 7 – Federalism Canons

Eskridge, Frickey, & Garrett, pp. 406-26

Along with *Gregory v. Ashcroft*, pp. 407-18, please read excerpts from Justice White's partial dissent and excerpts from Justice Blackmun's dissent, which are attached to this syllabus at pp. 48-52.

Bond v. United States, 572 U.S. 844 (2014), excerpts attached to this syllabus at pp. 53-63

Spring Break

Class 9 – Tuesday, March 21 – Legislative Background

Eskridge, Frickey, & Garrett, pp. 443-44, 459-60

Leo Sheep Co. v. United States, 440 U.S. 668 (1979), attached to this syllabus at pp. 64-72.

King v. Burwell, 135 S. Ct. 2480 (2015), excerpts attached to this syllabus at pp. 73-88.

Class 10 – Tuesday, March 28 – Legislative History

Eskridge, Frickey, & Garrett, pp. 469-92

Lockhart v. United States, 136 S. Ct. 958 (2016), excerpts attached to this syllabus at pp. 89-101.

Class 11 – Tuesday, April 4 – Legislative History

Eskridge, Frickey, & Garrett, pp. 495-97, 512-20, 282-92, 523-33

Class 12 – Tuesday, April 11 – Legislative History and Implied Repeals

Eskridge, Frickey, & Garrett, pp. 533-40, 545-62, 580-88

Class 13 – Tuesday, April 18 – A New “New Textualism”?

McGirt v. Oklahoma, 140 S. Ct. 2452 (2020), excerpts attached to this syllabus at pp. 102-11.

Bostock v. Clayton County, 140 S. Ct. 1731 (2020), excerpts attached to this syllabus at pp. 112-28.

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401 U.S. 424 (1971)

91 S.Ct. 849
Supreme Court of the United States

Willie S. GRIGGS et al., Petitioners,
v.
DUKE POWER COMPANY.
No. 124.

Argued Dec. 14, 1970.

Decided March 8, 1971.

Mr. Chief Justice BURGER delivered the opinion of the Court.

We granted the writ in this case to resolve the question whether an employer is prohibited by the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title VII, from requiring a high school education *426 or passing of a standardized general intelligence test as a condition of employment in or transfer to jobs when (a) neither standard is shown to be significantly related to successful job performance, (b) both requirements operate to disqualify Negroes at a substantially higher rate than white applicants, and (c) the jobs in question formerly had been filled only by white employees as part of a longstanding practice of giving preference to whites.¹

1 The Act provides:

‘Sec. 703. (a) It shall be an unlawful employment practice for an employer—

‘(2) to limit, segregate, or classify his employees in any way which would deprive or tend to deprive any individual of employment opportunities or otherwise adversely affect his status as an employee, because of such individual’s race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.

‘(h) Notwithstanding any other provision of this title, it shall not be an unlawful employment practice for an employer * * * to give and to act upon the results of any professionally developed ability test provided that such test, its administration or action upon the results is not designed, intended or used to discriminate because of race, color, religion, sex or national origin. * * *’ 78 Stat. 255, [42 U.S.C. s 2000e—2](#).

Congress provided, in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, for class actions for enforcement of provisions of the Act and this proceeding was brought by a group of incumbent Negro employees against Duke Power Company. All the petitioners are employed at the Company’s Dan River Steam Station, a power generating facility located at Draper, North Carolina. At the time this action was instituted, the Company had 95 employees at the Dan River Station, 14 of whom were Negroes; 13 of these are petitioners here.

The District Court found that prior to July 2, 1965, the effective date of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the *427 Company openly discriminated on the basis of race in the hiring and assigning of employees at its Dan River plant. The plant was organized into five operating departments: (1) Labor, (2) Coal Handling, (3) Operations, (4) Maintenance, and (5) Laboratory and Test. Negroes were employed only in the Labor Department where the highest paying jobs paid less than the lowest paying jobs in the other four ‘operating’ departments in which only whites were employed.² Promotions were normally made within each department on the basis of job seniority. Transferees into a department usually began in the lowest position.

2 A Negro was first assigned to a job in an operating department in August 1966, five months after charges had been filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. The employee, a high school graduate who had begun in the Labor Department in 1953, was promoted to a job in the Coal Handling Department.

In 1955 the Company instituted a policy of requiring a high school education for initial assignment to any department except Labor, and for transfer from the Coal Handling to any 'inside' department (Operations, Maintenance, or Laboratory). When the Company abandoned its policy of restricting Negroes to the Labor Department in 1965, completion of high school also was made a prerequisite to transfer from Labor to any other department. From the time the high school requirement was instituted to the time of trial, however, white employees hired before the time of the high school education requirement continued to perform satisfactorily and achieve promotions in the 'operating' **852 departments. Findings on this score are not challenged.

The Company added a further requirement for new employees on July 2, 1965, the date on which Title VII became effective. To qualify for placement in any but the Labor Department it became necessary to register satisfactory scores on two professionally prepared aptitude *428 tests, as well as to have a high school education. Completion of high school alone continued to render employees eligible for transfer to the four desirable departments from which Negroes had been excluded if the incumbent had been employed prior to the time of the new requirement. In September 1965 the Company began to permit incumbent employees who lacked a high school education to qualify for transfer from Labor or Coal Handling to an 'inside' job by passing two tests—the Wonderlic Personnel Test, which purports to measure general intelligence, and the Bennett Mechanical Comprehension Test. Neither was directed or intended to measure the ability to learn to perform a particular job or category of jobs. The requisite scores used for both initial hiring and transfer approximated the national median for high school graduates.³

3 The test standards are thus more stringent than the high school requirement, since they would screen out approximately half of all high school graduates.

The District Court had found that while the Company previously followed a policy of overt racial discrimination in a period prior to the Act, such conduct had ceased. The District Court also concluded that Title VII was intended to be prospective only and, consequently, the impact of prior inequities was beyond the reach of corrective action authorized by the Act.

The Court of Appeals was confronted with a question of first impression, as are we, concerning the meaning of Title VII. After careful analysis a majority of that court concluded that a subjective test of the employer's intent should govern, particularly in a close case, and that in this case there was no showing of a discriminatory purpose in the adoption of the diploma and test requirements. On this basis, the Court of Appeals concluded there was no violation of the Act.

*429 The Court of Appeals reversed the District Court in part, rejecting the holding that residual discrimination arising from prior employment practices was insulated from remedial action.⁴ The Court of Appeals noted, however, that the District Court was correct in its conclusion that there was no showing of a racial purpose or invidious intent in the adoption of the high school diploma requirement or general intelligence test and that these standards had been applied fairly to whites and Negroes alike. It held that, in the absence of a discriminatory purpose, use of such requirements was permitted by the Act. In so doing, the Court of Appeals rejected the claim that because these two requirements operated to render ineligible a markedly disproportionate number of Negroes, they were unlawful under Title VII unless shown to be job related.⁵ We **853 granted the writ on these claims. [399 U.S. 926, 90 S.Ct. 2238, 26 L.Ed.2d 791.](#)

4 The Court of Appeals ruled that Negroes employed in the Labor Department at a time when there was no high school or test requirement for entrance into the higher paying departments could not now be made subject to those requirements, since whites hired contemporaneously into those departments were never subject to them. The Court of Appeals also required that the seniority rights of those Negroes be measured on a plantwide, rather than a departmental, basis. However, the Court of Appeals denied relief to the Negro employees without a high school education or its equivalent who were hired into the Labor Department after institution of the educational requirement.

5 One member of that court disagreed with this aspect of the decision, maintaining, as do the petitioners in this Court, that Title VII prohibits the use of employment criteria that operate in a racially exclusionary fashion and do not measure skills or abilities necessary to performance of the jobs for which those criteria are used

The objective of Congress in the enactment of Title VII is plain from the language of the statute. It was to achieve equality of employment opportunities and remove *430 barriers that have operated in the past to favor an identifiable group of white employees over other employees. Under the Act, practices, procedures, or tests neutral on their face, and even neutral in terms of intent, cannot be maintained if they operate to 'freeze' the status quo of prior discriminatory employment practices.

The Court of Appeals' opinion, and the partial dissent, agreed that, on the record in the present case, 'whites register far better on the Company's alternative requirements' than Negroes.⁶ [420 F.2d 1225, 1239 n. 6](#). This consequence would appear to be directly traceable to race. Basic intelligence must have the means of articulation to manifest itself fairly in a testing process. Because they are Negroes, petitioners have long received inferior education in segregated schools and this Court expressly recognized these differences in [Gaston County v. United States, 395 U.S. 285, 89 S.Ct. 1720, 23 L.Ed.2d 309 \(1969\)](#). There, because of the inferior education received by Negroes in North Carolina, this Court barred the institution of a literacy test for voter registration on the ground that the test would abridge the right to vote indirectly on account of race. Congress did not intend by Title VII, however, to guarantee a job to every person regardless of qualifications. In short, the Act does not command that any *431 person be hired simply because he was formerly the subject of discrimination, or because he is a member of a minority group. Discriminatory preference for any group, minority or majority, is precisely and only what Congress has proscribed. What is required by Congress is the removal of artificial, arbitrary, and unnecessary barriers to employment when the barriers operate invidiously to discriminate on the basis of racial or other impermissible classification.

6 In North Carolina, 1960 census statistics show that, while 34% of white males had completed high school, only 12% of Negro males had done so. U.S. Bureau of the Census, U.S. Census of Population: 1960, Vol. 1, Characteristics of the Population, pt. 35, Table 47. Similarly, with respect to standardized tests, the EEOC in one case found that use of a battery of tests, including the Wonderlic and Bennett tests used by the Company in the instant case, resulted in 58% of whites passing the tests, as compared with only 6% of the blacks. Decision of EEOC, CCH Empl.Prac. Guide, 17,304.53 (Dec. 2, 1966). See also Decision of EEOC 70—552, CCH Empl.Prac. Guide, 6139 (Feb. 19, 1970).

Congress has now provided that tests or criteria for employment or promotion may not provide equality of opportunity merely in the sense of the fabled offer of milk to the stork and the fox. On the contrary, Congress has now required that the posture and condition of the job-seeker be taken into account. It has—to resort again to the fable—provided that the vessel in which the milk is proffered be one all seekers can use. The Act proscribes not only overt discrimination but also practices that are fair in form, but discriminatory in operation. The touchstone is business necessity. If an employment practice which operates to exclude Negroes cannot be shown to be related to job performance, the practice is prohibited.

On the record before us, neither the high school completion requirement nor the general intelligence test is shown to bear a demonstrable relationship to successful performance of the jobs for which it was used. Both were adopted, as the Court of Appeals noted, without meaningful study of their relationship to job-performance ability. Rather, a vice president of the Company testified,

the requirements were instituted on the Company's judgment that they generally would improve the overall quality of the work force.

****854** The evidence, however, shows that employees who have not completed high school or taken the tests have continued to perform satisfactorily and make progress in departments for which the high school and test criteria ***432** are now used.⁷ The promotion record of present employees who would not be able to meet the new criteria thus suggests the possibility that the requirements may not be needed even for the limited purpose of preserving the avowed policy of advancement within the Company. In the context of this case, it is unnecessary to reach the question whether testing requirements that take into account capability for the next succeeding position or related future promotion might be utilized upon a showing that such longrange requirements fulfill a genuine business need. In the present case the Company has made no such showing.

⁷ For example, between July 2, 1965, and November 14, 1966, the percentage of white employees who were promoted but who were not high school graduates was nearly identical to the percentage of nongraduates in the entire white work force.

The Court of Appeals held that the Company had adopted the diploma and test requirements without any 'intention to discriminate against Negro employees.' **420 F.2d, at 1232.** We do not suggest that either the District Court or the Court of Appeals erred in examining the employer's intent; but good intent or absence of discriminatory intent does not redeem employment procedures or testing mechanisms that operate as 'built-in headwinds' for minority groups and are unrelated to measuring job capability.

The Company's lack of discriminatory intent is suggested by special efforts to help the undereducated employees through Company financing of two-thirds the cost of tuition for high school training. But Congress directed the thrust of the Act to the consequences of employment practices, not simply the motivation. More than that, Congress has placed on the employer the burden of showing that any given requirement must have a manifest relationship to the employment in question.

***433** The facts of this case demonstrate the inadequacy of broad and general testing devices as well as the infirmity of using diplomas or degrees as fixed measures of capability. History is filled with examples of men and women who rendered highly effective performance without the conventional badges of accomplishment in terms of certificates, diplomas, or degrees. Diplomas and tests are useful servants, but Congress has mandated the commonsense proposition that they are not to become masters of reality.

The Company contends that its general intelligence tests are specifically permitted by s 703(h) of the Act.⁸ That section authorizes the use of 'any professionally developed ability test' that is not 'designed, intended or *used* to discriminate because of race * * *.' (Emphasis added.)

⁸ Section 703(h) applies only to tests. It has no applicability to the high school diploma requirement.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, having enforcement responsibility, has issued guidelines interpreting s 703(h) to permit only the use of job-related tests.⁹ The administrative ****855** interpretation of the ***434** Act by the enforcing agency is entitled to great deference. See, e.g., [United States v. City of Chicago, 400 U.S. 8, 91 S.Ct. 18, 27 L.Ed.2d 9 \(1970\)](#); [Udall v. Tallman, 380 U.S. 1, 85 S.Ct. 792, 13 L.Ed.2d 616 \(1965\)](#); [Power Reactor Development Co. v. Electricians, 367 U.S. 396, 81 S.Ct. 1529, 6 L.Ed.2d 924 \(1961\)](#). Since the Act and its legislative history support the Commission's construction, this affords good reason to treat the guidelines as expressing the will of Congress.

- 9 EEOC Guidelines on Employment Testing Procedures, issued August 24, 1966, provide: 'The Commission accordingly interprets 'professionally developed ability test' to mean a test which fairly measures the knowledge or skills required by the particular job or class of jobs which the applicant seeks, or which fairly affords the employer a chance to measure the applicant's ability to perform a particular job or class of jobs. The fact that a test was prepared by an individual or organization claiming expertise in test preparation does not, without more, justify its use within the meaning of Title VII.'
- The EEOC position has been elaborated in the new Guidelines on Employee Selection Procedures, 29 CFR s 1607, [35 Fed.Reg. 12333 \(Aug. 1, 1970\)](#). These guidelines demand that employers using tests have available 'data demonstrating that the test is predictive of or significantly correlated with important elements of work behavior which comprise or are relevant to the job or jobs for which candidates are being evaluated.' Id., at s 1607.4(c).

Section 703(h) was not contained in the House version of the Civil Rights Act but was added in the Senate during extended debate. For a period, debate revolved around claims that the bill as proposed would prohibit all testing and force employers to hire unqualified persons simply because they were part of a group formerly subject to job discrimination.¹⁰ Proponents of Title VII sought throughout the debate to assure the critics that the Act would have no effect on job-related tests. Senators Case of New Jersey and Clark of Pennsylvania, comanagers of the bill on the Senate floor, issued a memorandum explaining that the proposed Title VII 'expressly protects the employer's right to insist that any prospective applicant, Negro or white, *must meet the applicable job qualifications*. Indeed, the very purpose of title VII is to promote hiring on the basis of job qualifications, rather than on the basis of race or color.' 110 Cong.Rec. 7247.¹¹ (Emphasis added.) Despite *435 these assurances, Senator Tower of Texas introduced an amendment authorizing 'professionally developed ability tests.' Proponents of Title VII opposed the amendment because, as written, it would permit an employer to give any test, 'whether it was a good test or not, so long as it was professionally designed. Discrimination could actually exist under the **856 guise of compliance with the statute.' 110 Cong.Rec. 13504 (remarks of Sen. Case).

- 10 The congressional discussion was prompted by the decision of a hearing examiner for the Illinois Fair Employment Commission in *Myart v. Motorola Co.* (The decision is reprinted at 110 Cong.Rec. 5662.) That case suggested that standardized tests on which whites performed better than Negroes could never be used. The decision was taken to mean that such tests could never be justified even if the needs of the business required them. A number of Senators feared that Title VII might produce a similar result. See remarks of Senators Ervin, 110 Cong.Rec. 5614—5616; Smathers, id., at 5999—6000; Holland, id., at 7012—7013; Hill, id., at 8447; Tower, id., at 9024; Talmadge, id., at 9025—9026; Fulbright, id., at 9599—9600; and Ellender, id., at 9600.

11 The Court of Appeals majority, in finding no requirement in Title VII that employment tests be job related, relied in part on a quotation from an earlier Clark-Case interpretative memorandum addressed to the question of the constitutionality of Title VII. The Senators said in that memorandum:

‘There is no requirement in title VII that employers abandon bona fide qualification tests where, because of differences in background and education, members of some groups are able to perform better on these tests than members of other groups. An employer may set his qualifications as high as he likes, he may test to determine which applicants have these qualifications, and he may hire, assign, and promote on the basis of test performance.’ 110 Cong.Rec. 7213.

However, nothing there stated conflicts with the later memorandum dealing specifically with the debate over employer testing, 110 Cong.Rec. 7247 (quoted from in the text above), in which Senators Clark and Case explained that tests which measure ‘applicable job qualifications’ are permissible under Title VII. In the earlier memorandum Clark and Case assured the Senate that employers were not to be prohibited from using tests that determine qualifications. Certainly a reasonable interpretation of what the Senators meant, in light of the subsequent memorandum directed specifically at employer testing, was that nothing in the Act prevents employers from requiring that applicants be fit for the job.

The amendment was defeated and two days later Senator Tower offered a substitute amendment which was adopted verbatim and is now the testing provision of s 703(h). Speaking for the supporters of Title VII, Senator Humphrey, who had vigorously opposed the first amendment, endorsed the substitute amendment, stating: ‘Senators on both sides of the aisle who were deeply interested in title VII have examined the text of this *436 amendment and have found it to be in accord with the intent and purpose of that title.’ 110 Cong.Rec. 13724. The amendment was then adopted.¹² From the sum of the legislative history relevant in this case, the conclusion is inescapable that the EEOC’s construction of s 703(h) to require that employment tests be job related comports with congressional intent.

12 Senator Tower’s original amendment provided in part that a test would be permissible ‘if * * * in the case of any individual who is seeking employment with such employer, such test is designed to determine or predict whether such individual is suitable or trainable with respect to his employment in the particular business or enterprise involved * * *.’ 110 Cong.Rec. 13492. This language indicates that Senator Tower’s aim was simply to make certain that job-related tests would be permitted. The opposition to the amendment was based on its loose wording which the proponents of Title VII feared would be susceptible of misinterpretation. The final amendment, which was acceptable to all sides, could hardly have required less of a job relation than the first.

Nothing in the Act precludes the use of testing or measuring procedures; obviously they are useful. What Congress has forbidden is giving these devices and mechanisms controlling force unless they are demonstrably a reasonable measure of job performance. Congress has not commanded that the less qualified be preferred over the better qualified simply because of minority origins. Far from disparaging job qualifications as such, Congress has made such qualifications the controlling factor, so that race, religion, nationality, and sex become irrelevant. What Congress has commanded is that any tests used must measure the person for the job and not the person in the abstract.

The judgment of the Court of Appeals is, as to that portion of the judgment appealed from, reversed.

Mr. Justice BRENNAN took no part in the consideration or decision of this case.

Civil Rights Act of 1964
§ 703(i)

(i) Businesses or enterprises extending preferential treatment to Indians

Nothing contained in this subchapter shall apply to any business or enterprise on or near an Indian reservation with respect to any publicly announced employment practice of such business or enterprise under which a preferential treatment is given to any individual because he is an Indian living on or near a reservation.

Selected provisions of the Civil Rights Act of 1991

“The purposes of this Act are— . . . (2) to codify the concepts of "business necessity" and "job related" enunciated by the Supreme Court in *Griggs v. Duke Power Co.*, 401 U.S. 424 (1971), and in the other Supreme Court decisions prior to *Wards Cove Packing Co. v. Atonio*, 490 U.S. 642 (1989)”

An unlawful employment practice based on disparate impact is established if “a complaining party demonstrates that a respondent uses a particular employment practice that causes a disparate impact on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin and the respondent fails to demonstrate that the challenged practice is job related for the position in question and consistent with business necessity”

“No statements other than the interpretive memorandum appearing at Vol. 137 Congressional Record S 15276 (daily ed. Oct. 25, 1991) shall be considered legislative history of, or relied upon in any way as legislative history in construing or applying, any provision of this Act that relates to *Wards Cove*—Business necessity/cumulation/alternative business practice.”

Act of February 26, 1885, 23 Stat. 332

Statute at issue in *Rector, Holy Trinity Church v. United States*
143 U.S. 457 (1892)

CHAP. 164.—An act to prohibit the importation and migration of foreigners and aliens under contract or agreement to perform labor in the United States, its Territories, and the District of Columbia.

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That from and after the passage of this act it shall be unlawful for any person, company, partnership, or corporation, in any manner whatsoever, to prepay the transportation, or in any way assist or encourage the importation or migration of any alien or aliens, any foreigner or foreigners, into the United States, its Territories, or the District of Columbia, under contract or agreement, parol or special, express or implied, made previous to the importation or migration of such alien or aliens, foreigner or foreigners, to perform labor or service of any kind in the United States, its Territories or the District of Columbia.

SEC. 2. That all contracts or agreements, express or implied, parol or special, which may hereafter be made by and between any person, company, partnership, or corporation, and any foreigner or foreigners, alien or aliens, to perform labor or service or having reference to the performance of labor or service by any person in the United States, its Territories, or the District of Columbia previous to the migration or importation of the person or persons whose labor or service is contracted for into the United States, shall be utterly void and of no effect.

SEC. 3. That for every violation of any of the provisions of section one of this act the person, partnership, company, or corporation violating the same, by knowingly assisting, encouraging or soliciting the migration or importation of any alien or aliens, foreigner or foreigners, into the United States, its Territories, or the District of Columbia, to perform labor or service of any kind under contract or agreement, express or implied, parol or special, with such alien or aliens, foreigner or foreigners, previous to becoming residents or citizens of the United States, shall forfeit and pay for every such offence the sum of one thousand dollars, which may be sued for and recovered by the United States or by any person who shall first bring his action therefor including any such alien or foreigner who may be a party to any such contract or agreement, as debts of like amount are now recovered in the circuit courts of the United States; the proceeds to be paid into the Treasury of the United States; and separate suits may be brought for each alien or foreigner being a party to such contract or agreement aforesaid. And it shall be the duty of the district attorney of the proper district to prosecute every such suit at the expense of the United States.

SEC. 4. That the master of any vessel who shall knowingly bring within the United States on any such vessel, and land, or permit to be landed, from any foreign port or place, any alien laborer, mechanic, or artisan who, previous to embarkation on such vessel, had entered into contract or agreement, parol or special, express or implied, to perform labor or service in the United States, shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor, and on conviction thereof, shall be punished by a fine of not more than five hundred dollars for each and every such alien laborer, mechanic or artisan so brought as aforesaid, and may also be imprisoned for a term not exceeding six months.

SEC. 5. That nothing in this act shall be so construed as to prevent any citizen or subject of any foreign country temporarily residing in the United States, either in private or official capacity, from engaging, under contract or otherwise, persons not residents or citizens of the United States to act as private secretaries, servants, or domestics for such foreigner temporarily residing in the United States as aforesaid; nor shall this act be so construed as to prevent any person, or persons, partnership, or corporation from engaging, under contract or agreement, skilled workman in foreign countries to perform labor in the United States in or upon any new industry not at present established in the United States: *Provided*, That skilled labor for that purpose cannot be otherwise obtained; nor shall the provisions of this act apply to professional actors, artists, lecturers, or singers, nor to persons employed strictly as personal domestic servants: *Provided*, That nothing in this act shall be construed as prohibiting any individual from assisting any member of his family or any relative or personal friend, to migrate from any foreign country to the United States, for the

purpose of settlement here.

SEC. 6. That all laws or parts of laws conflicting herewith be, and the same are hereby, repealed.

Approved, February 26, 1885.

491 U.S. 440

Supreme Court of the United States

PUBLIC CITIZEN, Appellant,
v.
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE et al.
WASHINGTON LEGAL FOUNDATION, Appellant,
v.
UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE et al.

Nos. 88-429, 88-494.

Argued April 17, 1989.
Decided June 21, 1989.

[BRENNAN, J., delivered the opinion of the Court, in which WHITE, MARSHALL, BLACKMUN, and STEVENS, JJ., joined. KENNEDY, J., filed an opinion concurring in the judgment, in which REHNQUIST, C.J., and O'CONNOR, J., joined, *post*, p. 2573. SCALIA, J., took no part in the consideration or decision of the cases.]

***443 Justice BRENNAN delivered the opinion of the Court.**

The Department of Justice regularly seeks advice from the American Bar Association's Standing Committee on Federal Judiciary regarding potential nominees for federal judgeships. The question before us is whether the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA), 86 Stat. 770, as amended, 5 U.S.C.App. § 1 *et seq.* (1982 ed. and Supp. V), applies to these consultations and, if it does, whether its application interferes unconstitutionally with the President's prerogative under Article II to nominate and appoint officers of the United States; violates the doctrine of separation of powers; or unduly infringes the First Amendment right of members of the American Bar Association to freedom of association and expression. We hold that FACA does not apply to this special advisory relationship. We therefore do not reach the constitutional questions presented.

I

A

The Constitution provides that the President "shall nominate, and by and with the Advice and Consent of the Senate, shall appoint" Supreme Court Justices and, as established by Congress, other federal judges. Art. II, § 2, cl. 2. Since 1952 the President, through the Department of Justice, has requested advice from the American Bar Association's Standing Committee on Federal Judiciary (ABA Committee) in making such nominations.

The American Bar Association is a private voluntary professional association of approximately 343,000 attorneys. It has several working committees, among them the advisory body whose work is at issue here. The ABA Committee consists of 14 persons belonging to, and chosen by, the American Bar Association. Each of the 12 federal judicial Circuits (not including the Federal Circuit) has one representative on the ABA Committee, except for the Ninth Circuit, which has *444 two; in addition, one member is chosen at large. The ABA Committee receives no federal funds. It does not recommend persons for appointment to the federal bench of its own initiative.

Prior to announcing the names of nominees for judgeships on the courts of appeals, the district courts, or the Court of International Trade, the President, acting through the Department of Justice, routinely requests a potential nominee to complete a questionnaire drawn up by the ABA Committee and to submit it to the Assistant Attorney General for the Office of Legal Policy, to the chair of the ABA Committee, and to the committee member (usually the representative of the relevant judicial Circuit) charged with investigating the nominee. The potential nominee's answers ****2562** and the referral of his or her name to the ABA Committee are kept confidential. The committee member conducting the investigation then reviews the legal writings of the potential nominee, interviews judges, legal scholars, and other attorneys regarding the potential nominee's qualifications, and discusses the matter confidentially with representatives of various professional organizations and other groups. The committee member also interviews the potential nominee, sometimes with other committee members in attendance.

Following the initial investigation, the committee representative prepares for the chair an informal written report describing the potential nominee's background, summarizing all interviews, assessing the candidate's qualifications, and recommending one of four possible ratings: "exceptionally well qualified," "well qualified," "qualified," or "not qualified." ***445** The chair then makes a confidential informal report to the Attorney General's Office. The chair's report discloses the substance of the committee representative's report to the chair, without revealing the identity of persons who were interviewed, and indicates the evaluation the potential nominee is likely to receive if the Department of Justice requests a formal report.

If the Justice Department does request a formal report, the committee representative prepares a draft and sends copies to other members of the ABA Committee, together with relevant materials. A vote is then taken and a final report approved. The ABA Committee conveys its rating--though not its final report--in confidence to the Department of Justice, accompanied by a statement whether its rating was supported by all committee members, or whether it only commanded a majority or substantial majority of the ABA Committee. After considering the rating and other information the President and his advisers have assembled, including a report by the Federal Bureau of Investigation and additional interviews conducted by the President's judicial selection committee, the President then decides whether to nominate the candidate. If the candidate is in fact nominated, the ABA Committee's rating, but not its report, is made public at the request of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

B

FACA was born of a desire to assess the need for the "numerous committees, boards, commissions, councils, and similar ***446** groups which have been established to advise officers and agencies in the executive branch of the Federal Government." § 2(a), as set forth in 5 U.S.C.App. § 2(a). [FN4] Its purpose was to ensure that new advisory committees be established only when essential and that their number be minimized; that they be terminated when they have outlived their usefulness; that their creation, operation, and duration be subject to uniform standards and procedures; that Congress and the public remain apprised of their existence, activities, and ****2563** cost; and that their work be exclusively advisory in nature. § 2(b).

FN4. Federal advisory committees are legion. During fiscal year 1988, 58 federal departments sponsored 1,020 advisory committees. General Services Administration, Seventeenth Annual Report of the President on Federal Advisory Committees 1 (1988). Over 3,500 meetings were held, and close to 1,000 reports were issued. *Ibid.* Costs for fiscal year 1988 totaled over \$92 million, roughly half of which was spent on federal staff support. *Id.*, at 3.

To attain these objectives, FACA directs the Director of the Office of Management and Budget and agency heads to establish various administrative guidelines and management controls for advisory committees. It also imposes a number of requirements on advisory groups. For example, FACA requires that each advisory committee file a charter, § 9(c) and keep detailed minutes of its meetings. § 10(c). Those meetings must be chaired or attended by an officer or employee of the Federal Government who is authorized to adjourn any meeting when he or she deems its adjournment in the public interest. § 10(e). FACA also requires advisory committees to provide advance notice of their meetings and to open them to the public, § 10(a), unless the President or

the agency head to which an advisory committee reports determines that it may be closed to the public in accordance with the Government in the Sunshine Act, 5 U.S.C. § 552b(c). § 10(d). In addition, FACA stipulates that advisory committee minutes, records, and reports be made available *447 to the public, provided they do not fall within one of the Freedom of Information Act's exemptions, see 5 U.S.C. § 552, and the Government does not choose to withhold them. § 10(b). Advisory committees established by legislation or created by the President or other federal officials must also be "fairly balanced in terms of the points of view represented and the functions" they perform. §§ 5(b)(2), (c). Their existence is limited to two years, unless specifically exempted by the entity establishing them. § 14(a)(1).

C

In October 1986, appellant Washington Legal Foundation (WLF) brought suit against the Department of Justice after the ABA Committee refused WLF's request for the names of potential judicial nominees it was considering and for the ABA Committee's reports and minutes of its meetings. WLF asked the District Court for the District of Columbia to declare the ABA Committee an "advisory committee" as FACA defines that term. WLF further sought an injunction ordering the Justice Department to cease utilizing the ABA Committee as an advisory committee until it complied with FACA. In particular, WLF contended that the ABA Committee must file a charter, afford notice of its meetings, open those meetings to the public, and make its minutes, records, and reports available for public inspection and copying.

....

II

[discussion of standing omitted]

III

[2] Section 3(2) of FACA, as set forth in 5 U.S.C.App. § 3(2), defines "advisory committee" as follows:

"For the purpose of this Act--

* * *

"(2) The term 'advisory committee' means any committee, board, commission, council, conference, panel, task force, or other similar group, or any subcommittee or other subgroup thereof (hereafter in this paragraph referred to as 'committee'), which is--

"(A) established by statute or reorganization plan, or

"(B) established or utilized by the President, or

"(C) established or utilized by one or more agencies, in the interest of obtaining advice or recommendations for the President or one or more agencies or officers of the Federal Government, except that such term excludes *452 (i) the Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations, (ii) the Commission on Government Procurement, and (iii) any committee which is composed wholly of full-time officers or employees of the Federal Government."

Appellants agree that the ABA Committee was not "established" by the President or the Justice Department. Equally plainly, the ABA Committee is a committee that furnishes "advice or recommendations" to the President via the Justice Department. Whether the ABA Committee constitutes an "advisory committee" for purposes of FACA therefore depends upon whether it is "utilized" by the President or the Justice Department as Congress intended that term to be understood.

There is no doubt that the Executive makes use of the ABA Committee, and thus "utilizes" it in one common sense of the term. As the District Court recognized, however, "reliance on the plain language of FACA alone is not entirely satisfactory." "Utilize" is a woolly verb, its contours left undefined by the statute itself. Read unqualifiedly, it would extend FACA's requirements to any group of two or more persons, or at least any formal organization, from which the President or an Executive agency seeks advice. [FN8] We are convinced that Congress did not intend that result. A nodding acquaintance with FACA's purposes, *453 as manifested by its legislative history and as recited in § 2 of the Act, reveals that it cannot have been Congress' intention, for example, to require the filing of a charter, the presence of a controlling federal official, and detailed minutes any time the President seeks the views of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) before nominating Commissioners to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, or asks the leaders of an American Legion Post he is visiting for the organization's opinion on some aspect of military policy.

FN8. FACA provides exceptions for advisory committees established or utilized by the Central Intelligence Agency or the Federal Reserve System, § 4(b), as well as for "any local civic group whose primary function is that of rendering a public service with respect to a Federal program, or any State or local committee, council, board, commission, or similar group established to advise or make recommendations to State or local officials or agencies." § 4(c). The presence of these exceptions does little to curtail the almost unfettered breadth of a dictionary reading of FACA's definition of "advisory committee."

Nor can Congress have meant--as a straightforward reading of "utilize" would appear to require--that all of FACA's restrictions apply if a President consults with his own political party before picking his Cabinet. It was unmistakably *not* Congress' intention to intrude on a political party's freedom to conduct its affairs as it chooses, or its ability to advise elected officials who belong to that party, by placing a federal employee in charge of each advisory group meeting and making its minutes public property. FACA was enacted to cure specific ills, above all the wasteful expenditure of public funds for worthless committee meetings and biased proposals; although its reach is extensive, we cannot believe that it was intended to cover every formal and informal consultation between the President or an Executive agency and a group rendering advice. [FN9] As we *454 said in *Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States*, 143 U.S. 457, 459 (1892): "[F]requently words of general meaning are used in a statute, words broad enough to include an act in question, and yet a consideration of the whole legislation, or of the circumstances surrounding its enactment, or of the absurd results which follow from giving such broad meaning to the words, makes it unreasonable to believe that the legislator intended to include the particular act."

FN9. Justice KENNEDY agrees with our conclusion that an unreflective reading of the term "utilize" would include the President's occasional consultations with groups such as the NAACP and committees of the President's own political party. Having concluded that groups such as these are covered by the statute when they render advice, however, Justice KENNEDY refuses to consult FACA's legislative history--which he later denounces, with surprising hyperbole, as "unauthoritative materials," although countless opinions of this Court, including many written by the concurring Justices, have rested on just such materials--because this result would not, in his estimation, be "absurd." Although this Court has never adopted so strict a standard for reviewing committee reports, floor debates, and other nonstatutory indications of congressional intent, *and we explicitly reject that standard today*, even if "absurdity" were the test, one would think it was met here. The idea that Members of Congress would vote for a bill subjecting their own political parties to bureaucratic intrusion and public oversight when a President or Cabinet officer consults with party committees concerning political appointments is outlandish. Nor does it strike us as in any way "unhealthy," or undemocratic, to use all available materials in ascertaining the intent of our elected representatives, rather than read their enactments as requiring what may seem a disturbingly unlikely result, provided only that the result is not "absurd." Indeed, the sounder and more democratic course, the course that strives for allegiance to Congress' desires in all cases, not just those where Congress' statutory directive is plainly sensible or borders on the lunatic, is the traditional approach we reaffirm today.

Where the literal reading of a statutory term would "compel an odd result," *Green v. Bock Laundry Machine Co.*, 490 U.S. 504, 509, 109 S.Ct. 1981, 1984 (1989), we must search for other evidence of congressional intent to lend the term its proper scope. See also, e.g., *Church of the Holy Trinity, supra*, 143 U.S., at 472, 12 S.Ct., at 516; *FDIC v. Philadelphia Gear Corp.*, 476 U.S. 426, 432, 106 S.Ct. 1931, 1935, 90 L.Ed.2d 428 (1986). "The circumstances of the enactment of particular legislation," for example, "may persuade a court that Congress did not intend words of common meaning to have their literal effect." *Watt v. Alaska*, 451 U.S. 259, 266, 101 S.Ct. 1673, 1677, 68 L.Ed.2d 80 (1981). Even though, as Judge Learned Hand said, "the words used, even in their literal sense, are the primary, and ordinarily the most reliable, source of interpreting the meaning of any writing," nevertheless "it is one of the surest indexes of a mature and developed jurisprudence not to make a fortress out of the dictionary; *455 but to remember that statutes always have some purpose or object to accomplish, whose sympathetic and imaginative discovery is the surest guide to their meaning." *Cabell v. Markham*, 148 F.2d 737, 739 (CA2), aff'd, 326 U.S. 404 (1945). Looking beyond the naked text for guidance is perfectly proper when the result it apparently decrees is difficult to fathom or where it seems inconsistent with Congress' intention, since the plain-meaning rule is "rather an axiom of experience than a rule of law, and does not preclude consideration of persuasive evidence if it exists." *Boston Sand & Gravel Co. v. United States*, 278 U.S. 41, 48, 49 S.Ct. 52, 53 (1928) (Holmes, J.). See also *United States v. American Trucking Assns., Inc.*, 310 U.S. 534, 543-544, 60 S.Ct. 1059, 1063-64 (1940) ("When aid to construction of the meaning of words, as used in the statute, is available, there certainly can be no 'rule of law' which forbids its use, however clear the words may appear on 'superficial examination'") (citations omitted).

Consideration of FACA's purposes and origins in determining whether the term "utilized" was meant to apply to the Justice Department's use of the ABA Committee is particularly appropriate here, given the importance we have consistently attached to interpreting statutes to avoid deciding difficult constitutional questions where the text fairly admits of a less problematic construction. It is therefore imperative that we consider indicators of congressional intent in addition to the statutory language before concluding that FACA was meant to cover the ABA Committee's provision of advice to the Justice Department in connection with judicial nominations.

B

Close attention to FACA's history is helpful, for FACA did not flare on the legislative scene with the suddenness of a meteor. Similar attempts to regulate the Federal Government's use of advisory committees were common during the 20 years preceding FACA's enactment. An understanding of those efforts is essential to ascertain the intended scope of the term "utilize."

In 1950, the Justice Department issued guidelines for the operation of federal advisory committees in order to forestall their facilitation of anticompetitive behavior by bringing industry leaders together with Government approval. Several years later, after the House Committee on Government Operations found that the Justice Department's guidelines were frequently ignored, Representative Fascell sponsored a bill that would have accorded the guidelines legal status. Although the bill would have required agencies to report to Congress on their use of advisory committees and would have subjected advisory committees to various controls, it apparently would not have imposed any requirements on private groups, not established by the Federal Government, whose advice was sought by the Executive.

Despite Congress' failure to enact the bill, the Bureau of the Budget issued a directive in 1962 incorporating the bulk of the guidelines. Later that year, President Kennedy issued Executive Order No. 11007, which governed the functioning of advisory committees until FACA's passage. Executive Order No. 11007 is the probable source of the term "utilize" as later employed in FACA.

The Order applied to advisory committees "formed by a *457 department or agency of the Government in the interest of obtaining advice or recommendations," or "not formed by a department or agency, but only during any period when it is being *utilized* by a department or agency in the same manner as a Government-formed advisory committee." To a large extent, FACA adopted wholesale the provisions of Executive Order No. 11007. For example, like FACA, Executive Order No. 11007 stipulated that no advisory committee be formed or utilized unless

authorized by law or determined as a matter of formal record by an agency head to be in the public interest; that all advisory committee meetings be held in the presence of a Government employee empowered to adjourn the meetings whenever he or she considered adjournment to be in the public interest; that meetings only occur at the call of, or with the advance approval of, a federal employee; that minutes be kept of the meetings; and that committees terminate after two years unless a statute or an agency head decreed otherwise.

There is no indication, however, that Executive Order No. 11007 was intended to apply to the Justice Department's consultations with the ABA Committee. Neither President Kennedy, who issued the Order, nor President Johnson, nor President Nixon apparently deemed the ABA Committee to be "utilized" by the Department of Justice in the relevant sense of that term. Notwithstanding the ABA Committee's highly visible role in advising the Justice Department regarding potential judicial nominees, and notwithstanding the fact that the Order's requirements were established by the Executive itself rather than Congress, no President or Justice Department official applied them to the ABA Committee. As an entity formed privately, rather than at the Federal Government's prompting, to render confidential advice with respect to the President's constitutionally specified power to nominate federal judges--an entity in receipt of no federal funds and not amenable to the strict management by ***458** agency officials envisaged by Executive Order No. 11007--the ABA Committee cannot easily be said to have been "utilized by a department or agency in the same manner as a Government-formed advisory committee." That the Executive apparently did not consider the ABA Committee's activity within the terms of its own Executive Order is therefore unsurprising.

Although FACA's legislative history evinces an intent to widen the scope of Executive Order No. 11007's definition of "advisory committee" by including "Presidential ****2569** advisory committees," which lay beyond the reach of Executive Order No. 11007 as well as to augment the restrictions applicable ***459** to advisory committees covered by the statute, there is scant reason to believe that Congress desired to bring the ABA Committee within FACA's net. FACA's principal purpose was to enhance the public accountability of advisory committees established by the Executive Branch and to reduce wasteful expenditures on them. That purpose could be accomplished, however, without expanding the coverage of Executive Order No. 11007 to include privately organized committees that received no federal funds. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that Congress sought nothing more than stricter compliance with reporting and other requirements--which *were* made more stringent--by advisory committees already covered by the Order and similar treatment of a small class of publicly funded groups created by the President.

The House bill which in its amended form became FACA applied exclusively to advisory committees "established" by statute or by the Executive, whether by a federal agency or by the President himself. Although the House Committee Report stated that the class of advisory committees was to include "committees which may have been organized before their advice was sought by the President or any agency, but which are used by the President or any agency in the same way as an advisory committee formed by the President himself or the agency itself," it is questionable whether the Report's authors believed that the Justice Department used the ABA Committee in the same way as it used advisory committees it established. The phrase "used ... in the same way" is reminiscent of Executive Order No. 11007's reference to advisory committees "utilized ... in the same manner" as a committee established by the Federal Government, and the practice of three administrations demonstrates that Executive Order No. 11007 did not encompass the ABA Committee.

460** This inference draws support from the earlier House Report which instigated the legislative efforts that culminated in FACA. That Report complained that committees "utilized" by an agency--as opposed to those established directly by an agency--rarely complied with the requirements of Executive Order No. 11007. But it did not cite the ABA Committee or similar advisory committees as willful evaders of the Order. Rather, the Report's paradigmatic *2570** example of a committee "utilized" by an agency for purposes of Executive Order No. 11007 was an advisory committee established by a quasi-public organization in receipt of public funds, such as the National Academy of Sciences. [FN11] There is no indication in the Report that a purely private group like the ABA Committee that was not formed by the Executive, accepted no public funds, and assisted the Executive in performing a constitutionally specified task committed to the Executive was within the terms of Executive Order No. 11007 or was the type of advisory entity

that legislation was urgently needed to address.

FN11. The relevant paragraph the Report reads in full:

"The definition, further, states 'the term also includes any committee, board, ... that is not formed by a department or agency, when it is being utilized by a department or agency in the same manner as a Government- formed advisory committee.' Rarely were such committees reported. A great number of the approximately 500 advisory committees of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) and its affiliates possibly should be added to the above 1800 advisory committees as the NAS committees fall within the intent and literal definition of advisory committees under Executive Order 11007. The National Academy of Sciences was created by Congress as a semi-private organization for the explicit purpose of furnishing advice to the Government. This is done by the use of advisory committees. The Government meets the expense of investigations and reports prepared by the Academy committees at the request of the Government. Yet, very few of the Academy committees were reported by the agencies and departments of the Government."

***461** Paralleling the initial House bill, the Senate bill that grew into FACA defined "advisory committee" as one "established or organized" by statute, the President, or an Executive agency. Like the House Report, the accompanying Senate Report stated that the phrase "established or organized" was to be understood in its "most liberal sense, so that when an officer brings together a group by formal or informal means, by contract or other arrangement, and whether or not Federal money is expended, to obtain advice and information, such group is covered by the provisions of this bill. While the Report manifested a clear intent not to restrict FACA's coverage to advisory committees funded by the Federal Government, it did not indicate any desire to bring all private advisory committees within FACA's terms. Indeed, the examples the Senate Report offers--"the Advisory Council on Federal Reports, the National Industrial Pollution Control Council, the National Petroleum Council, advisory councils to the National Institutes of Health, and committees of the national academies where they are utilized and officially recognized as advisory to the President, to an agency, or to a Government official,"--are limited to groups organized by, or closely tied to, the Federal Government, and thus enjoying quasi-public status. Given the prominence of the ABA Committee's role and its familiarity to Members of Congress, its omission from the list of groups formed and maintained by private initiative to offer advice with respect to the President's nomination of Government officials is telling. If the examples offered by the Senate Committee on Government Operations are representative, as seems fair to surmise, then there is little reason to think that there was any support, at least at the committee stage, for going beyond the terms of Executive Order No. 11007 to regulate comprehensively the workings of the ABA Committee.

It is true that the final version of FACA approved by both Houses employed the phrase "established or utilized," ***462** and that this phrase is more capacious than the word "established" or the phrase "established or organized." But its genesis suggests that it was not intended to go much beyond those narrower formulations. The words "or utilized" were added by the Conference Committee to the definition included in the House bill. The Joint Explanatory Statement, however, said simply that the definition contained in the House bill was adopted "with modification." ****2571** The Conference Report offered no indication that the modification was significant, let alone that it would substantially broaden FACA's application by sweeping within its terms a vast number of private groups, such as the Republican National Committee, not formed at the behest of the Executive or by quasi-public organizations whose opinions the Federal Government sometimes solicits. Indeed, it appears that the House bill's initial restricted focus on advisory committees established by the Federal Government, in an expanded sense of the word "established," was retained rather than enlarged by the Conference Committee. In the section dealing with FACA's range of application, the Conference Report stated: "The Act does not apply to persons or organizations which have contractual relationships with Federal agencies *nor to advisory committees not directly established by or for such agencies.*" (emphasis added). The phrase "or utilized" therefore appears to have been added simply to clarify that FACA applies to advisory committees established by the Federal Government in a generous sense of that term, encompassing groups formed indirectly by quasi-public organizations such as the National Academy of Sciences "for" public agencies as well as "by" such agencies themselves.

Read in this way, the term "utilized" would meet the concerns of the authors of the House Report that advisory committees covered by Executive Order No. 11007, because they were "utilized by a department or agency in the same manner as a Government-formed advisory committee" *463 such as the groups organized by the National Academy of Sciences and its affiliates which the Report discussed--would be subject to FACA's requirements. And it comports well with the initial House and Senate bills' limited extension to advisory groups "established," on a broad understanding of that word, by the Federal Government, whether those groups were established by the Executive Branch or by statute or whether they were the offspring of some organization created or permeated by the Federal Government. Read in this way, however, the word "utilized" does not describe the Justice Department's use of the ABA Committee. Consultations between the Justice Department and the ABA Committee were not within the purview of Executive Order No. 11007, nor can the ABA Committee be said to have been formed by the Justice Department or by some semiprivate entity the Federal Government helped bring into being.

In sum, a literalistic reading of § 3(2) would bring the Justice Department's advisory relationship with the ABA Committee within FACA's terms, particularly given FACA's objective of opening many advisory relationships to public scrutiny except in certain narrowly defined situations. [FN12] A *464 **2572 literalistic reading, however, would catch far more groups and consulting arrangements than Congress could conceivably have intended. And the careful review which this interpretive difficulty warrants of earlier efforts to regulate *465 federal advisory committees and the circumstances surrounding FACA's adoption strongly suggests that FACA's definition of "advisory committee" was not meant to encompass the ABA Committee's relationship with the Justice Department. That relationship seems not to have been within the contemplation of Executive Order No. 11007. And FACA's legislative history does not display an intent to widen the Order's application to encircle it. Weighing the deliberately inclusive statutory language against other evidence of congressional intent, it seems to us a close question whether FACA should be construed to apply to the ABA Committee, although on the whole we are fairly confident it should not. There is, however, one additional consideration which, in our view, tips the balance decisively against FACA's application.

FN12. [Discussion of deference to administrative agency omitted]

C

"When the validity of an act of the Congress is drawn in question, and even if a serious doubt of constitutionality is raised, it is a cardinal principle that this Court will first ascertain whether a construction of the statute is fairly possible *466 by which the question may be avoided." *Crowell v. Benson*, 285 U.S. 22, 62, 52 S.Ct. 285, 296, 76 L.Ed. 598 (1932) (footnote collecting citations omitted). It has long been an axiom of statutory interpretation that "where an otherwise acceptable construction of a statute would raise serious constitutional problems, the Court will construe the statute to **2573 avoid such problems unless such construction is plainly contrary to the intent of Congress." *Edward J. DeBartolo Corp. v. Florida Gulf Coast Building & Construction Trades Council*, 485 U.S. 568, 575, 108 S.Ct. 1392, 1397, 99 L.Ed.2d 645 (1988). See also *St. Martin Evangelical Lutheran Church v. South Dakota*, 451 U.S. 772, 780, 101 S.Ct. 2142, 2147, 68 L.Ed.2d 612 (1981); *NLRB v. Catholic Bishop of Chicago*, 440 U.S. 490, 500-501, 99 S.Ct. 1313, 1318-1319, 59 L.Ed.2d 533 (1979); *Machinists v. Street*, 367 U.S. 740, 749-750, 81 S.Ct. 1784, 1789-90, 6 L.Ed.2d 1141 (1961). This approach, we said recently, "not only reflects the prudential concern that constitutional issues not be needlessly confronted, but also recognizes that Congress, like this Court, is bound by and swears an oath to uphold the Constitution." *Edward J. DeBartolo Corp.*, *supra*, 485 U.S., at 575, 108 S.Ct., at 1397. Our reluctance to decide constitutional issues is especially great where, as here, they concern the relative powers of coordinate branches of government. See *American Foreign Service Assn. v. Garfinkel*, 490 U.S. 153, 161, 109 S.Ct. 1693, 1697-1698, 104 L.Ed.2d 139 (1989) (*per curiam*). Hence, we are loath to conclude that Congress intended to press ahead into dangerous constitutional thickets in the absence of firm evidence that it courted those perils.

That construing FACA to apply to the Justice Department's consultations with the ABA Committee would present formidable constitutional difficulties is undeniable. The District Court declared FACA unconstitutional insofar as it applied to those consultations, because it concluded

that FACA, so applied, infringed unduly on the President's Article II power to nominate federal judges and violated the doctrine of separation of powers. Whether or not the court's conclusion *467 was correct, there is no gainsaying the seriousness of these constitutional challenges.

To be sure, "[w]e cannot press statutory construction 'to the point of disingenuous evasion' even to avoid a constitutional question." *United States v. Locke*, 471 U.S. 84, 96, 105 S.Ct. 1785, 1793, 85 L.Ed.2d 64 (1985), quoting *Moore Ice Cream Co. v. Rose*, 289 U.S. 373, 379, 53 S.Ct. 620, 622, 77 L.Ed. 1265 (1933). But unlike in *Locke*, where "nothing in the legislative history remotely suggest[ed] a congressional intent contrary to Congress' chosen words," 471 U.S., at 96, 105 S.Ct., at 1793, our review of the regulatory scheme prior to FACA's enactment and the likely origin of the phrase "or utilized" in FACA's definition of "advisory committee" reveals that Congress probably did not intend to subject the ABA Committee to FACA's requirements when the ABA Committee offers confidential advice regarding Presidential appointments to the federal bench. Where the competing arguments based on FACA's text and legislative history, though both plausible, tend to show that Congress did not desire FACA to apply to the Justice Department's confidential solicitation of the ABA Committee's views on prospective judicial nominees, sound sense counsels adherence to our rule of caution. Our unwillingness to resolve important constitutional questions unnecessarily thus solidifies our conviction that FACA is inapplicable.

The judgment of the District Court is

Affirmed.

Justice SCALIA took no part in the consideration or decision of these cases.

Justice KENNEDY, with whom THE CHIEF JUSTICE and Justice O'CONNOR join, concurring in the judgment.

"In a government, where the liberties of the people are to be preserved ..., the executive, legislative and judicial, should ever be separate and distinct, and consist *468 of parts, mutually forming a check **2574 upon each other." C. Pinckney, Observations on the Plan of Government Submitted to the Federal Convention of May 28, 1787, reprinted in 3 M. Farrand, Records of the Federal Convention of 1787, p. 108 (rev. ed. 1966).

The Framers of our Government knew that the most precious of liberties could remain secure only if they created a structure of Government based on a permanent separation of powers. See, e.g., The Federalist Nos. 47-51 (J. Madison). Indeed, the Framers devoted almost the whole of their attention at the Constitutional Convention to the creation of a secure and enduring structure for the new Government. It remains one of the most vital functions of this Court to police with care the separation of the governing powers. That is so even when, as is the case here, no immediate threat to liberty is apparent. When structure fails, liberty is always in peril. As Justice Frankfurter stated:

"The accretion of dangerous power does not come in a day. It does come, however slowly, from the generative force of unchecked disregard of the restrictions that fence in even the most disinterested assertion of authority." *Youngstown Sheet & Tube Co. v. Sawyer*, 343 U.S. 579, 594, 72 S.Ct. 863, 889, 96 L.Ed. 1153 (1952) (concurring opinion).

Although one is perhaps more obvious than the other, this suit presents two distinct issues of the separation of powers. The first concerns the rules this Court must follow in interpreting a statute passed by Congress and signed by the President. On this subject, I cannot join the Court's conclusion that the Federal Advisory Committee Act (FACA) does not cover the activities of the American Bar Association's Standing Committee on Federal Judiciary in advising the Department of Justice regarding potential nominees for federal judgeships. The result seems sensible in the abstract; but I cannot accept the method by which the Court *469 arrives at its interpretation of FACA, which does not accord proper respect to the finality and binding effect of legislative enactments. The second question in the case is the extent to which Congress may interfere with

the President's constitutional prerogative to nominate federal judges. On this issue, which the Court does not reach because of its conclusion on the statutory question, I think it quite plain that the application of FACA to the Government's use of the ABA Committee is unconstitutional.

I

The statutory question in this suit is simple enough to formulate. FACA applies to "any committee" that is "established or utilized" by the President or one or more agencies, and which furnishes "advice or recommendations" to the President or one or more agencies. All concede that the ABA Committee furnishes advice and recommendations to the Department of Justice and through it to the President. The only question we face, therefore, is whether the ABA Committee is "utilized" by the Department of Justice or the President.

There is a ready starting point, which ought to serve also as a sufficient stopping point, for this kind of analysis: the plain language of the statute. Yet the Court is unwilling to rest on this foundation, for several reasons. One is an evident unwillingness to define the application of the statute in terms of the ordinary meaning of its language. We are told that "utilize" is "a woolly verb," and therefore we cannot be content to rely on what is described, with varying levels of animus, as a "literal reading," a "literalistic reading," and "a dictionary reading" of this word. We also are told in no uncertain terms that we cannot rely on (what I happen to regard as a more accurate description) "a straightforward reading of 'utilize.'" Reluctance to working with the basic meaning of words in a normal manner undermines the legal process. These cases demonstrate that reluctance of this *470 sort leads instead **2575 to woolly judicial construction that mars the plain face of legislative enactments.

The Court concedes that the Executive Branch "utilizes" the ABA Committee in the common sense of that word. Indeed, this point cannot be contested. As the Court's own recitation of the facts makes clear, the Department of Justice has, over the last four decades, made regular use of the ABA Committee to investigate the background of potential nominees and to make critical recommendations regarding their qualifications. This should end the matter. The Court nevertheless goes through several more steps to conclude that, although "it seems to us a close question," Congress did not intend that FACA would apply to the ABA Committee.

Although I believe the Court's result is quite sensible, I cannot go along with the unhealthy process of amending the statute by judicial interpretation. Where the language of a statute is clear in its application, the normal rule is that we are bound by it. There is, of course, a legitimate exception to this rule, which the Court invokes, see *ante*, at 2566, citing *Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States*, 143 U.S. 457, 459, 12 S.Ct. 511, 512, 36 L.Ed. 226 (1892), and with which I have no quarrel. Where the plain language of the statute would lead to "patently absurd consequences," *United States v. Brown*, 333 U.S. 18, 27, 68 S.Ct. 376, 380, 92 L.Ed. 442 (1948), that "Congress could not possibly have intended," *FBI v. Abramson*, 456 U.S. 615, 640, 102 S.Ct. 2054, 2069, 72 L.Ed.2d 376 (1982) (O'CONNOR, J., dissenting) (emphasis added), we need not apply the language in such a fashion. When used in a proper manner, this narrow exception to our normal rule of statutory construction does not intrude upon the lawmaking powers of Congress, but rather demonstrates a respect for the coequal Legislative Branch, which we assume would not act in an absurd way.

This exception remains a legitimate tool of the Judiciary, however, only as long as the Court acts with self-discipline by limiting the exception to situations where the result of applying the plain language would be, in a genuine sense, absurd, *471 *i.e.*, where it is quite impossible that Congress could have intended the result, and where the alleged absurdity is so clear as to be obvious to most anyone. A few examples of true absurdity are given in the *Holy Trinity* decision cited by the Court, such as where a sheriff was prosecuted for obstructing the mails even though he was executing a warrant to arrest the mail carrier for murder, or where a medieval law against drawing blood in the streets was to be applied against a physician who came to the aid of a man who had fallen down in a fit. In today's opinion, however, the Court disregards the plain language of the statute not because its application would be patently absurd, but rather because, on the basis of its view of the legislative history, the Court is "fairly confident" that "FACA should [not] be construed to apply to the ABA Committee." I believe the Court's loose invocation of the "absurd

result" canon of statutory construction creates too great a risk that the Court is exercising its own "WILL instead of JUDGMENT," with the consequence of "substituti[ng] [its own] pleasure to that of the legislative body." The Federalist No. 78, p. 469 (C. Rossiter ed. 1961) (A. Hamilton).

The Court makes only a passing effort to show that it would be absurd to apply the term "utilize" to the ABA Committee according to its commonsense meaning. It offers three examples that we can assume are meant to demonstrate this point: the application of FACA to an American Legion Post should the President visit that organization and happen to ask its opinion on some aspect of military policy; the application of FACA to the meetings of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) should the President seek its views in nominating Commissioners to the Equal Employment ****2576** Opportunity Commission; and the application of FACA to the national committee of the President's political party should he consult it for advice and ***472** recommendations before picking his Cabinet.

None of these examples demonstrate the kind of absurd consequences that would justify departure from the plain language of the statute. A commonsense interpretation of the term "utilize" would not necessarily reach the kind of ad hoc contact with a private group that is contemplated by the Court's American Legion hypothetical. Such an interpretation would be consistent, moreover, with the regulation of the General Services Administration (GSA) regulation interpreting the word "utilize," which the Court in effect ignores. As for the more regular use contemplated by the Court's examples concerning the NAACP and the national committee of the President's political party, it would not be at all absurd to say that, under the Court's hypothetical, these groups would be "utilized" by the President to obtain "advice or recommendations" on appointments, and therefore would fall within the coverage of the statute. Rather, what is troublesome about these examples is that they raise the very same serious constitutional questions that confront us here (and perhaps others as well). The Court confuses the two points. The fact that a particular application of the clear terms of a statute might be unconstitutional does not, in and of itself, render a straightforward application of the language absurd, so as to allow us to conclude that the statute does not apply.

Unable to show that an application of FACA according the plain meaning of its terms would be absurd, the Court turns instead to the task of demonstrating that a straightforward reading of the statute would be inconsistent with the congressional purposes that lay behind its passage. To the student of statutory construction, this move is a familiar one. It is, as the Court identifies it, the classic *Holy Trinity* argument. "[A] thing may be within the letter of the statute and ***473** yet not within the statute, because not within its spirit, nor within the intention of its makers." *Holy Trinity*. I cannot embrace this principle. Where it is clear that the unambiguous language of a statute embraces certain conduct, and it would not be patently absurd to apply the statute to such conduct, it does not foster a democratic exegesis for this Court to rummage through unauthoritative materials to consult the spirit of the legislation in order to discover an alternative interpretation of the statute with which the Court is more comfortable. It comes as a surprise to no one that the result of the Court's lengthy journey through the legislative history is the discovery of a congressional intent not to include the activities of the ABA Committee within the coverage of FACA. The problem with spirits is that they tend to reflect less the views of the world whence they come than the views of those who seek their advice.

Lest anyone think that my objection to the use of the *Holy Trinity* doctrine is a mere point of interpretive purity divorced from more practical considerations, I should pause for a moment to recall the unhappy genesis of that doctrine and its unwelcome potential. In *Holy Trinity*, the Court was faced with the interpretation of a statute which made it unlawful for

"any person, company, partnership, or corporation, in any manner whatsoever, to prepay the transportation, or in any way assist or encourage the importation or migration of any alien or aliens, any foreigner or foreigners, into the United States ..., under contract or agreement ... made previous to the importation or migration of such alien or aliens, foreigner or foreigners, to perform labor or service of any kind in the United States."

The Church of the Holy Trinity entered into a contract with an alien residing in ****2577** England to come to the United States to serve as the director and pastor of the church. Notwithstanding the fact that this agreement fell within the plain language ***474** of the statute, which was conceded

to be the case, see *ibid.*, the Court overrode the plain language, drawing instead on the background and purposes of the statute to conclude that Congress did not intend its broad prohibition to cover the importation of Christian ministers. The central support for the Court's ultimate conclusion that Congress did not intend the law to cover Christian ministers is its lengthy review of the "mass of organic utterances" establishing that "this is a Christian nation," and which were taken to prove that it could not "be believed that a Congress of the United States intended to make it a misdemeanor for a church of this country to contract for the services of a Christian minister residing in another nation." I should think the potential of this doctrine to allow judges to substitute their personal predilections for the will of the Congress is so self-evident from the case which spawned it as to require no further discussion of its susceptibility to abuse.

Even if I were inclined to disregard the unambiguous language of FACA, I could not join the Court's conclusions with regard to Congress' purposes. I find the Court's treatment of the legislative history one sided and offer a few observations on the difficulties of perceiving the true contours of a spirit.

The first problem with the Court's use of legislative history is the questionable relevance of its detailed account of Executive practice before the enactment of FACA. This background is interesting but not instructive, for as the Court acknowledges, even the legislative history as presented by the Court "evinces an intent to widen the scope of" the coverage of prior Executive Orders, and in any event the language of the statute is "more capacious" than any of the previous "narrower formulations." Indeed, Congress would have had little reason to legislate at all in this area if it had intended FACA to be nothing more than a reflection of the provisions of Executive Order No. 11007, which was already the settled *475 and governing law at the time this bill was introduced, considered, and enacted. In other words, the background to FACA cannot be taken to illuminate its breadth precisely because FACA altered the landscape to address the many concerns Congress had about the increasing growth and use of advisory committees.

Another problem with the Court's approach lies in its narrow preoccupation with the ABA Committee against the background of a bill that was intended to provide comprehensive legislation covering a widespread problem in the organization and operation of the Federal Government. The Court's discussion takes portentous note of the fact that Congress did not mention or discuss the ABA Committee by name in the materials that preceded the enactment of FACA. But that is hardly a remarkable fact. The legislation was passed at a time when somewhere between 1,800 and 3,200 target committees were thought to be in existence, and the congressional Reports mentioned few committees by name. More to the point, its argument reflects an incorrect understanding of the kinds of laws Congress passes: it usually does not legislate by specifying examples, but by identifying broad and general principles that must be applied to particular factual instances. And that is true of FACA.

Finally, though the stated objective of the Court's inquiry into legislative history is the identification of Congress' purposes in passing FACA, the inquiry does not focus on the most obvious place for finding those purposes, which is the section of the Conference Committee Report entitled "Findings and Purposes." That section lists six findings and purposes that underlie FACA:

"(1) the need for many existing advisory committees has not been adequately reviewed;

"(2) new advisory committees should be established only when they are determined to be essential and their number should be kept to the minimum necessary;

"(3) advisory committees should be terminated when they are no longer carrying out the purposes for which they were established;

"(4) standards and uniform procedures should govern the establishment, operation, administration, and duration of advisory committees;

"(5) the Congress and the public should be kept informed with respect to the number, purpose, membership, activities, and cost of advisory committees; and

"(6) the function of advisory committees should be advisory only, and that all matters under their consideration should be determined, in accordance with law, by the official, agency, or officer involved."

The most pertinent conclusion to be drawn from this list of purposes is that all of them are implicated by the Justice Department's use of the ABA Committee. In addition, it shows that Congress' stated purposes for addressing the use of advisory committees went well beyond the amount of public funds devoted to their operations, which in any event is not the sole component in the cost of their use; thus the Court errs in focusing on this point.

It is most striking that this section of the Conference Committee Report, which contains Congress' own explicit statement of its purposes in adopting FACA, receives no mention by the Court on its amble through the legislative history. The one statement the Court does quote from this Report, that FACA does not apply " 'to advisory committees not directly established by or for [federal] agencies,' " (emphasis deleted), is of uncertain value. It is not clear that this passage would exclude the ABA Committee, which was established in 1946 and began almost at once to advise the Government on judicial nominees. It also is not clear why the reasons a committee was formed should determine whether and how they are "utilized by" the Government, or how this consideration *477 can be squared with the plain language of the statute. The Court professes puzzlement because the Report says only that the Conference Committee modified the definition of "advisory committee" to include the phrase "or utilized," but does not explain the extent of the modification in any detail. One would have thought at least that the Court would have been led to consider how the specific purposes Congress identified for this legislation might shed light on the reasons for the change.

Not only does the Court's decision today give inadequate respect to the statute passed by Congress, it also gives inadequate deference to the GSA's regulations interpreting FACA. [discussion of deference to GSA omitted]

In sum, it is quite desirable not to apply FACA to the ABA Committee. I cannot, however, reach this conclusion as a matter of fair statutory construction. The plain and ordinary meaning of the language passed by Congress governs, and its application does not lead to any absurd results. An unnecessary recourse to the legislative history only confirms this conclusion. And the reasonable and controlling interpretation of the statute adopted by the agency charged with its implementation is also in accord.

The Court's final step is to summon up the traditional principle that statutes should be construed to avoid constitutional questions. Although I agree that we should "first ascertain whether a construction of the statute is fairly possible by which the [constitutional] question may be avoided," *Crowell v. Benson*, 285 U.S. 22, 62, 52 S.Ct. 285, 296, 76 L.Ed. 598 (1932), this principle cannot be stretched beyond the point at which such a construction remains "fairly possible." And it should not be given too broad a scope lest a whole new range of Government action be proscribed by interpretive shadows cast by constitutional provisions that might or might not invalidate it. The fact that a particular application of the clear terms of a statute might be unconstitutional does not provide us with a justification for ignoring the plain meaning of the statute. If that were permissible, then the power of judicial review **2581 of legislation could be made unnecessary, for whenever the application of a statute would have potential inconsistency with the Constitution, we could merely opine that the statute did not cover the conduct in question because it would be discomfiting or even absurd to think that Congress intended to act in an unconstitutional manner. The utter circularity of this approach explains why it has never been our rule.

*482 The Court's ultimate interpretation of FACA is never clearly stated, except for the conclusion that the ABA Committee is not covered. It seems to read the "utilized by" portion of the statute as encompassing only a committee "established by a quasi-public organization in receipt of public funds," or encompassing "groups formed indirectly by quasi-public organizations such as the National Academy of Sciences." This is not a "fairly possible" construction of the statutory language even to a generous reader. I would find the ABA Committee to be covered by FACA. It is, therefore, necessary for me to reach and decide the constitutional issue presented.

II

[discussion of constitutional issue omitted]

For these reasons, I concur in the judgment.

135 S.Ct. 1074
Supreme Court of the United States

John L. YATES, Petitioner
v.
UNITED STATES.
No. 13–7451.

Argued Nov. 5, 2014.

Decided Feb. 25, 2015.

Justice GINSBURG announced the judgment of the Court and delivered an opinion, in which THE CHIEF JUSTICE, Justice BREYER, and Justice SOTOMAYOR join.

John Yates, a commercial fisherman, caught undersized red grouper in federal waters in the Gulf of Mexico. To prevent federal authorities from confirming that he had harvested undersized fish, Yates ordered a crew member to toss the suspect catch into the sea. For this offense, he was charged with, and convicted of, violating [18 U.S.C. § 1519](#), which provides:

“Whoever knowingly alters, destroys, mutilates, conceals, covers up, falsifies, or makes a false entry in any record, document, or tangible object with the intent to impede, obstruct, or influence the investigation or proper administration of any matter within the jurisdiction of any department or agency of the United States or any case filed under title 11, or in relation to or contemplation of any such matter or case, shall be fined under this title, imprisoned not more than 20 years, or both.”

....

Yates . . . maintains that fish are not trapped within the term “tangible object,” as that term is used in [§ 1519](#).

[Section 1519](#) was enacted as part of the Sarbanes–Oxley Act of 2002, 116 Stat. 745, legislation designed to protect investors and restore trust in financial markets following the collapse of Enron Corporation. A fish is no doubt an object that is tangible; fish can be seen, caught, and handled, and a catch, as this case illustrates, is vulnerable to destruction. But it would cut [§ 1519](#) loose from its financial-fraud mooring to hold that it encompasses any and all objects, whatever their size or significance, destroyed with obstructive intent. Mindful that in Sarbanes–Oxley, Congress trained its attention on corporate and accounting deception and cover-ups, we conclude that a matching construction of [§ 1519](#) is in order: A tangible object captured by [§ 1519](#), we hold, must be one used to record or preserve information.

....

II

The Sarbanes–Oxley Act, all agree, was prompted by the exposure of Enron's massive accounting fraud and revelations that the company's outside auditor, Arthur Andersen LLP, had systematically destroyed potentially incriminating documents. The Government acknowledges that [§ 1519](#) was intended to prohibit, in particular, corporate document-shredding to hide evidence of financial wrongdoing. Brief for United States 46. Prior law made it an offense to “intimidat[e], threat[n], or corruptly persuad[e] *another person*” to shred documents. § 1512(b) (emphasis added). [Section 1519](#) cured a conspicuous omission by imposing liability on a person who destroys records himself. See [S.Rep. No. 107–146, p. 14](#) (2002) (describing [§ 1519](#) as “a new general anti shredding

provision” and explaining that “certain current provisions make it a crime to persuade another person to destroy documents, but not a crime to actually destroy the same documents yourself”). The new section also expanded prior law by including within the provision's reach “any matter within the jurisdiction of any department or agency of the United States.” *Id.*, at 14–15.

In the Government's view, [§ 1519](#) extends beyond the principal evil motivating its passage. The words of [§ 1519](#), the Government argues, support reading the provision as a general ban on the spoliation of evidence, covering all physical items that might be relevant to any matter under federal investigation.

Yates urges a contextual reading of [§ 1519](#), tying “tangible object” to the surrounding words, the placement of the provision within the Sarbanes–Oxley Act, and related provisions enacted at the same time, in particular § 1520 and § 1512(c)(1), see *infra*, at 1083, 1084 – 1085. [Section 1519](#), he maintains, targets not all manner of evidence, but records, documents, and tangible objects used to preserve them, *e.g.*, computers, servers, and other media on which information is stored.

We agree with Yates and reject the Government's unrestrained reading. “Tangible object” in [§ 1519](#), we conclude, is better read to cover only objects one can use to record or preserve information, not all objects in the physical world.

A

The ordinary meaning of an “object” that is “tangible,” as stated in dictionary definitions, is “a discrete . . . thing,” Webster's Third New International Dictionary 1555 (2002), that “possess[es] physical form,” Black's Law Dictionary 1683 (10th ed. 2014). From this premise, the Government concludes that “tangible object,” as that term appears in [§ 1519](#), covers the waterfront, including fish from the sea.

Whether a statutory term is unambiguous, however, does not turn solely on dictionary definitions of its component words. Rather, “[t]he plainness or ambiguity of statutory language is determined *1082 [not only] by reference to the language itself, [but as well by] the specific context in which that language is used, and the broader context of the statute as a whole.” [Robinson v. Shell Oil Co.](#), 519 U.S. 337, 341, 117 S.Ct. 843, 136 L.Ed.2d 808 (1997). See also [Deal v. United States](#), 508 U.S. 129, 132, 113 S.Ct. 1993, 124 L.Ed.2d 44 (1993) (it is a “fundamental principle of statutory construction (and, indeed, of language itself) that the meaning of a word cannot be determined in isolation, but must be drawn from the context in which it is used”). Ordinarily, a word's usage accords with its dictionary definition. In law as in life, however, the same words, placed in different contexts, sometimes mean different things.

We have several times affirmed that identical language may convey varying content when used in different statutes, sometimes even in different provisions of the same statute. . . . As the Court observed in [Atlantic Cleaners & Dyers](#), 286 U.S., at 433, 52 S.Ct. 607:

“Most words have different shades of meaning and consequently may be variously construed. . . . Where the subject matter to which the words refer is not the same in the several places where [the words] are used, or the conditions are different, or the scope of the legislative power exercised in one case is broader than that exercised in another, the meaning well may vary to meet the purposes of the law, to be arrived at by a consideration of the language in which those purposes are expressed, and of the circumstances under which the language was employed.”²

² The dissent assiduously ignores all this, *post*, at 1096, in insisting that Congress wrote [§ 1519](#) to cover, along with shredded corporate documents, red grouper slightly smaller than the legal limit.

In short, although dictionary definitions of the words “tangible” and “object” bear

consideration, they are not dispositive of the meaning of “tangible object” in [§ 1519](#).

Supporting a reading of “tangible object,” as used in [§ 1519](#), in accord with dictionary definitions, the Government points to the appearance of that term in [Federal Rule of Criminal Procedure 16](#). That Rule requires the prosecution to *1083 grant a defendant's request to inspect “tangible objects” within the Government's control that have utility for the defense. See [Fed. Rule Crim. Proc. 16\(a\)\(1\)\(E\)](#).

[Rule 16](#)'s reference to “tangible objects” has been interpreted to include any physical evidence. See 5 W. LaFare, J. Israel, N. King, & O. Kerr, *Criminal Procedure* § 20.3(g), pp. 405–406, and n. 120 (3d ed. 2007). [Rule 16](#) is a discovery rule designed to protect defendants by compelling the prosecution to turn over to the defense evidence material to the charges at issue. In that context, a comprehensive construction of “tangible objects” is fitting. In contrast, [§ 1519](#) is a penal provision that refers to “tangible object” not in relation to a request for information relevant to a specific court proceeding, but rather in relation to federal investigations or proceedings of every kind, including those not yet begun.³ See [Commissioner v. National Carbide Corp., 167 F.2d 304, 306 \(C.A.2 1948\)](#) (Hand, J.) (“words are chameleons, which reflect the color of their environment”). Just as the context of [Rule 16](#) supports giving “tangible object” a meaning as broad as its dictionary definition, the context of [§ 1519](#) tugs strongly in favor of a narrower reading.

3

For the same reason, we do not think the meaning of “tangible objects” (or “tangible things,” see [Fed. Rule Civ. Proc. 26\(b\)](#)) in other discovery prescriptions cited by the Government leads to the conclusion that “tangible object” in [§ 1519](#) encompasses any and all physical evidence existing on land or in the sea.

B

Familiar interpretive guides aid our construction of the words “tangible object” as they appear in [§ 1519](#).

We note first [§ 1519](#)'s caption: “Destruction, alteration, or falsification of records in Federal investigations and bankruptcy.” That heading conveys no suggestion that the section prohibits spoliation of any and all physical evidence, however remote from records. Neither does the title of the section of the Sarbanes–Oxley Act in which [§ 1519](#) was placed, § 802: “Criminal penalties for altering documents.” 116 Stat. 800. Furthermore, § 1520, the only other provision passed as part of § 802, is titled “Destruction of corporate audit records” and addresses only that specific subset of records and documents. While these headings are not commanding, they supply cues that Congress did not intend “tangible object” in [§ 1519](#) to sweep within its reach physical objects of every kind, including things no one would describe as records, documents, or devices closely associated with them. See [Almendarez–Torres v. United States, 523 U.S. 224, 234, 118 S.Ct. 1219, 140 L.Ed.2d 350 \(1998\)](#) (“[T]he title of a statute and the heading of a section are tools available for the resolution of a doubt about the meaning of a statute.” (internal quotation marks omitted)). If Congress indeed meant to make [§ 1519](#) an all-encompassing ban on the spoliation of evidence, as the dissent believes Congress did, one would have expected a clearer indication of that intent.

[Section 1519](#)'s position within Chapter 73 of Title 18 further signals that [§ 1519](#) was not intended to serve as a cross-the-board ban on the destruction of physical evidence of every kind. Congress placed [§ 1519](#) (and its companion provision § 1520) at the end of the chapter, following immediately after the pre-existing § 1516, § 1517, and § 1518, each of them prohibiting obstructive acts in specific contexts. See § 1516 (audits of recipients of federal funds); § 1517 (federal examinations of financial institutions); § 1518 (criminal investigations of federal health care offenses). *1084 See also [S.Rep. No. 107–146, at 7](#) (observing that § 1517 and § 1518 “apply to obstruction in certain limited types of cases, such as bankruptcy fraud, examinations of financial institutions, and healthcare fraud”).

But Congress did not direct codification of the Sarbanes–Oxley Act's other additions to Chapter 73 adjacent to these specialized provisions. Instead, Congress directed placement

of those additions within or alongside retained provisions that address obstructive acts relating broadly to official proceedings and criminal trials: Section 806, “Civil Action to protect against retaliation in fraud cases,” was codified as § 1514A and inserted between the pre-existing § 1514, which addresses civil actions to restrain harassment of victims and witnesses in criminal cases, and § 1515, which defines terms used in § 1512 and § 1513. Section 1102, “Tampering with a record or otherwise impeding an official proceeding,” was codified as § 1512(c) and inserted within the pre-existing § 1512, which addresses tampering with a victim, witness, or informant to impede any official proceeding. Section 1107, “Retaliation against informants,” was codified as § 1513(e) and inserted within the pre-existing § 1513, which addresses retaliation against a victim, witness, or informant in any official proceeding. Congress thus ranked [§ 1519](#), not among the broad proscriptions, but together with specialized provisions expressly aimed at corporate fraud and financial audits. This placement accords with the view that Congress' conception of [§ 1519](#)'s coverage was considerably more limited than the Government's.⁴

⁴ The dissent contends that nothing can be drawn from the placement of [§ 1519](#) because, before and after Sarbanes–Oxley, “all of Chapter 73 was ordered chronologically.” *Post*, at 1095. The argument might have some force if the factual premise were correct. In Sarbanes–Oxley, Congress directed insertion of § 1514A *before* § 1518, then the last section in Chapter 73. If, as the dissent argues, Congress adopted [§ 1519](#) to fill out § 1512, *post*, at 6–7, it would have made more sense for Congress to codify the substance of [§ 1519](#) within § 1512 or in a new § 1512A, rather than placing [§ 1519](#) among specialized provisions. Notably, in Sarbanes–Oxley, Congress added § 1512(c)(1), “a broad ban on evidence-spoilation,” *cf. post*, at 1095, n. 2, to § 1512, even though § 1512's preexisting title and provisions all related to witness-tampering.

The contemporaneous passage of § 1512(c)(1), which was contained in a section of the Sarbanes–Oxley Act discrete from the section embracing [§ 1519](#) and [§ 1520](#), is also instructive. Section 1512(c)(1) provides:

“(c) Whoever corruptly—

“(1) alters, destroys, mutilates, or conceals a record, document, or other object, or attempts to do so, with the intent to impair the object's integrity or availability for use in an official proceeding

.....

“shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than 20 years, or both.”

The legislative history reveals that § 1512(c)(1) was drafted and proposed after [§ 1519](#). See 148 Cong. Rec. 12518, 13088–13089 (2002). The Government argues, and Yates does not dispute, that § 1512(c)(1)'s reference to “other object” includes any and every physical object. But if [§ 1519](#)'s reference to “tangible object” already included all physical objects, as the Government and the dissent contend, then Congress had no reason to enact § 1512(c)(1): Virtually any act that would violate § 1512(c)(1) no doubt would violate [§ 1519](#) as well, for [§ 1519](#) applies to “the investigation or proper administration of any matter within the jurisdiction of any department or agency of the United States . . . or in relation to or contemplation of any such matter,” not just to “an official proceeding.”⁵

⁵ Despite this sweeping “in relation to” language, the dissent remarkably suggests that [§ 1519](#) does not “ordinarily operate in th[e] context [of] federal court[s],” for those courts are not “department[s] or agenc[ies].” *Post*, at 1095. That suggestion, which, as one would expect, lacks the Government's endorsement, does not withstand examination. The Senate Committee Report on [§ 1519](#), on which the dissent elsewhere relies, see *post*, at 1093, explained that an obstructive act is within [§ 1519](#)'s scope if “done ‘in contemplation’ of or in relation to a matter or investigation.” *S. Rep. 107–146, at 15*. The Report further informed that [§ 1519](#) “is . . . meant to do away with the distinctions, which some courts have read into obstruction statutes, between court proceedings, investigations, regulatory or administrative proceedings (whether formal or not), and less formal government inquiries, regardless of their title.” *Ibid.* If any doubt remained about the multiplicity of contexts in which [§ 1519](#) was designed to apply, the Report added, “[t]he intent of the provision is simple; people should not be destroying, altering, or falsifying documents to obstruct any government function.” *Ibid.*

The Government acknowledges that, under its reading, [§ 1519](#) and [§ 1512\(c\)\(1\)](#) “significantly overlap.” Nowhere does the Government explain what independent function [§ 1512\(c\)\(1\)](#) would serve if the Government is right about the sweeping scope of [§ 1519](#). We resist a reading of [§ 1519](#) that would render superfluous an entire provision passed in

proximity as part of the same Act.⁶ See [Marx v. General Revenue Corp.](#), 568 U.S. _____, _____, 133 S.Ct. 1166, 1178, 185 L.Ed.2d 242 (2013) (“[T]he canon against surplusage is strongest when an interpretation would render superfluous another part of the same statutory scheme.”).

6 Furthermore, if “tangible object” in § 1519 is read to include any physical object, § 1519 would prohibit all of the conduct proscribed by § 2232(a), which imposes a maximum penalty of five years in prison for destroying or removing “property” to prevent its seizure by the Government. See *supra*, at 1078 – 1079.

The words immediately surrounding “tangible object” in § 1519—“falsifies, or makes a false entry in any record [or] document”—also cabin the contextual meaning of that term. As explained in [Gustafson v. Alloyd Co.](#), 513 U.S. 561, 575, 115 S.Ct. 1061, 131 L.Ed.2d 1 (1995), we rely on the principle of *noscitur a sociis*—a word is known by the company it keeps—to “avoid ascribing to one word a meaning so broad that it is inconsistent with its accompanying words, thus giving unintended breadth to the Acts of Congress.” (internal quotation marks omitted). See also [United States v. Williams](#), 553 U.S. 285, 294, 128 S.Ct. 1830, 170 L.Ed.2d 650 (2008) (“a word is given more precise content by the neighboring words with which it is associated”). In *Gustafson*, we interpreted the word “communication” in § 2(10) of the Securities Act of 1933 to refer to a public communication, rather than any communication, because the word appeared in a list with other words, notably “notice, circular, [and] advertisement,” making it “apparent that the list refer[red] to documents of wide dissemination.” 513 U.S., at 575–576, 115 S.Ct. 1061. And we did so even though the list began with the word “any.”

The *noscitur a sociis* canon operates in a similar manner here. “Tangible object” is the last in a list of terms that begins “any record [or] document.” The term is therefore appropriately read to refer, not to any tangible object, but specifically to the subset of tangible objects involving records and documents, *i.e.*, objects used to record or preserve information. See [United States Sentencing Commission, Guidelines Manual § 2J1.2](#), comment., n. 1 (Nov. 2014) (“‘Records, documents, or *1086 tangible objects’ includes (A) records, documents, or tangible objects that are stored on, or that are, magnetic, optical, digital, other electronic, or other storage mediums or devices; and (B) wire or electronic communications.”).

This moderate interpretation of “tangible object” accords with the list of actions § 1519 proscribes. The section applies to anyone who “alters, destroys, mutilates, conceals, covers up, falsifies, or makes a false entry in any record, document, or tangible object” with the requisite obstructive intent. (Emphasis added.) The last two verbs, “falsif[y]” and “mak[e] a false entry in,” typically take as grammatical objects records, documents, or things used to record or preserve information, such as logbooks or hard drives. See, *e.g.*, Black’s Law Dictionary 720 (10th ed. 2014) (defining “falsify” as “[t]o make deceptive; to counterfeit, forge, or misrepresent; esp., to tamper with (a document, record, etc.)”). It would be unnatural, for example, to describe a killer’s act of wiping his fingerprints from a gun as “falsifying” the murder weapon. But it would not be strange to refer to “falsifying” data stored on a hard drive as simply “falsifying” a hard drive. Furthermore, Congress did not include on § 1512(c)(1)’s list of prohibited actions “falsifies” or “makes a false entry in.” See § 1512(c)(1) (making it unlawful to “alte[r], destro [y], mutilat[e], or concea[l] a record, document, or other object” with the requisite obstructive intent). That contemporaneous omission also suggests that Congress intended “tangible object” in § 1519 to have a narrower scope than “other object” in § 1512(c)(1).⁷

7 The dissent contends that “record, document, or tangible object” in § 1519 should be construed in conformity with “record, document, or other object” in § 1512(c)(1) because both provisions address “the same basic problem.” *Post*, at 1096 – 1097. But why should that be so when Congress prohibited in § 1519 additional actions, specific to paper and electronic documents and records, actions it did not prohibit in § 1512(c)(1)? When Congress passed Sarbanes–Oxley in 2002, courts had already interpreted the phrase “alter, destroy, mutilate, or conceal an object” in § 1512(b)(2)(B) to apply to all types of physical evidence. See, *e.g.*, [United States v. Applewhaite](#), 195 F.3d 679, 688 (C.A.3 1999) (affirming conviction under § 1512(b)(2)(B) for persuading another person to paint over blood spatter). Congress’ use of a formulation in § 1519 that did not track the one used in § 1512(b)(2)(B) (and repeated in § 1512(c)(1)) suggests that Congress designed § 1519 to be interpreted apart from § 1512, not in lockstep with it.

A canon related to *noscitur a sociis*, *eiusdem generis*, counsels: “Where general words

follow specific words in a statutory enumeration, the general words are [usually] construed to embrace only objects similar in nature to those objects enumerated by the preceding specific words.” Washington State Dept. of Social and Health Servs. v. Guardianship Estate of Keffeler, 537 U.S. 371, 384, 123 S.Ct. 1017, 154 L.Ed.2d 972 (2003) (internal quotation marks omitted). In Begay v. United States, 553 U.S. 137, 142–143, 128 S.Ct. 1581, 170 L.Ed.2d 490 (2008), for example, we relied on this principle to determine what crimes were covered by the statutory phrase “any crime . . . that . . . is burglary, arson, or extortion, involves use of explosives, or otherwise involves conduct that presents a serious potential risk of physical injury to another,” 18 U.S.C. § 924(e)(2)(B)(ii). The enumeration of specific crimes, we explained, indicates that the “otherwise involves” provision covers “only *similar* crimes, rather than *every* crime that ‘presents a serious potential risk of physical injury to another.’ ” 553 U.S., at 142, 128 S.Ct. 1581. Had Congress intended the latter “all encompassing” meaning, we observed, “it is hard to see why it would have needed to include the examples at all.” *Ibid.* See also CSX *1087 Transp., Inc. v. Alabama Dept. of Revenue, 562 U.S. 277, ———, 131 S.Ct. 1101, 1113, 179 L.Ed.2d 37 (2011) (“We typically use *ejusdem generis* to ensure that a general word will not render specific words meaningless.”). Just so here. Had Congress intended “tangible object” in § 1519 to be interpreted so generically as to capture physical objects as dissimilar as documents and fish, Congress would have had no reason to refer specifically to “record” or “document.” The Government’s unbounded reading of “tangible object” would render those words misleading surplusage.

Having used traditional tools of statutory interpretation to examine markers of congressional intent within the Sarbanes–Oxley Act and § 1519 itself, we are persuaded that an aggressive interpretation of “tangible object” must be rejected. It is highly improbable that Congress would have buried a general spoliation statute covering objects of any and every kind in a provision targeting fraud in financial record-keeping.

The Government argues, however, that our inquiry would be incomplete if we failed to consider the origins of the phrase “record, document, or tangible object.” Congress drew that phrase, the Government says, from a 1962 Model Penal Code (MPC) provision, and reform proposals based on that provision. The MPC provision and proposals prompted by it would have imposed liability on anyone who “alters, destroys, mutilates, conceals, or removes a record, document or thing.” See ALI, MPC § 241.7(1), p. 175 (1962). Those proscriptions were understood to refer to all physical evidence. See MPC § 241.7, Comment 3, at 179 (1980) (provision “applies to any physical object”). Accordingly, the Government reasons, and the dissent exuberantly agrees, *post*, at 4–5, Congress must have intended § 1519 to apply to the universe of physical evidence.

The inference is unwarranted. True, the 1962 MPC provision prohibited tampering with any kind of physical evidence. But unlike § 1519, the MPC provision did not prohibit actions that specifically relate to records, documents, and objects used to record or preserve information. The MPC provision also ranked the offense as a misdemeanor and limited liability to instances in which the actor “believ[es] that an official proceeding or investigation is pending or about to be instituted.” MPC § 241.7(1), at 175. Yates would have had scant reason to anticipate a felony prosecution, and certainly not one instituted at a time when even the smallest of the fish he caught came within the legal limit. See *supra*, at 1080; cf. Bond v. United States, 572 U.S. ———, ———, 134 S.Ct. 2077, 2089–2090, 189 L.Ed.2d 1 (2014) (rejecting “boundless reading” of a statutory term given “deeply serious consequences” that reading would entail). A proposed federal offense in line with the MPC provision, advanced by a federal commission in 1971, was similarly qualified. See Final Report of the National Commission on Reform of Federal Criminal Laws § 1323, pp. 116–117 (1971).

Section 1519 conspicuously lacks the limits built into the MPC provision and the federal proposal. It describes not a misdemeanor, but a felony punishable by up to 20 years in prison. And the section covers conduct intended to impede any federal investigation or proceeding, including one not even on the verge of commencement. Given these significant differences, the meaning of “record, document, or thing” in the MPC provision and a kindred proposal is not a reliable indicator of the meaning Congress assigned to “record,

document, or tangible object” in [§ 1519](#). The MPC provision, in short, tells us neither “what *1088 Congress wrote [nor] what Congress wanted,” concerning Yates's small fish as the subject of a federal felony prosecution.

C

Finally, if our recourse to traditional tools of statutory construction leaves any doubt about the meaning of “tangible object,” as that term is used in [§ 1519](#), we would invoke the rule that “ambiguity concerning the ambit of criminal statutes should be resolved in favor of lenity.” [Cleveland v. United States](#), 531 U.S. 12, 25, 121 S.Ct. 365, 148 L.Ed.2d 221 (2000) (quoting [Rewis v. United States](#), 401 U.S. 808, 812, 91 S.Ct. 1056, 28 L.Ed.2d 493 (1971)). That interpretative principle is relevant here, where the Government urges a reading of [§ 1519](#) that exposes individuals to 20–year prison sentences for tampering with *any* physical object that *might* have evidentiary value in *any* federal investigation into *any* offense, no matter whether the investigation is pending or merely contemplated, or whether the offense subject to investigation is criminal or civil. See [Liparota v. United States](#), 471 U.S. 419, 427, 105 S.Ct. 2084, 85 L.Ed.2d 434 (1985) (“Application of the rule of lenity ensures that criminal statutes will provide fair warning concerning conduct rendered illegal and strikes the appropriate balance between the legislature, the prosecutor, and the court in defining criminal liability.”). In determining the meaning of “tangible object” in [§ 1519](#), “it is appropriate, before we choose the harsher alternative, to require that Congress should have spoken in language that is clear and definite.” See [Cleveland](#), 531 U.S., at 25, 121 S.Ct. 365 (quoting [United States v. Universal C.I.T. Credit Corp.](#), 344 U.S. 218, 222, 73 S.Ct. 227, 97 L.Ed. 260 (1952)). See also [Jones v. United States](#), 529 U.S. 848, 858–859, 120 S.Ct. 1904, 146 L.Ed.2d 902 (2000) (rule of lenity “reinforces” the conclusion that arson of an owner-occupied residence is not subject to federal prosecution under [18 U.S.C. § 844\(i\)](#) because such a residence does not qualify as property “used in” commerce or commerce-affecting activity).⁸

8

The dissent cites [United States v. McRae](#), 702 F.3d 806, 834–838 (C.A.5 2012), [United States v. Maury](#), 695 F.3d 227, 243–244 (C.A.3 2012), and [United States v. Natal](#), 2014 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 108852, *24–*26 (Conn., Aug. 7, 2014), as cases that would not be covered by [§ 1519](#) as we read it. *Post*, at 1100 – 1101. Those cases supply no cause for concern that persons who commit “major” obstructive acts, *id.* at 1100, will go unpunished. The defendant in *McRae*, a police officer who seized a car containing a corpse and then set it on fire, was also convicted for that conduct under [18 U.S.C. § 844\(h\)](#) and sentenced to a term of 120 months' imprisonment for that offense. See [702 F.3d](#), at [817–818](#), [839–840](#). The defendant in *Natal*, who repainted a van to cover up evidence of a fatal arson, was also convicted of three counts of violating [18 U.S.C. § 3](#) and sentenced to concurrent terms of 174 months' imprisonment. See Judgment in [United States v. Morales](#), No. 3:12–cr–164 (Conn., Jan. 12, 2015). And the defendant in *Maury*, a company convicted under [§ 1519](#) of concealing evidence that a cement mixer's safety lock was disabled when a worker's fingers were amputated, was also convicted of numerous other violations, including three counts of violating [18 U.S.C. § 1505](#) for concealing evidence of other worker safety violations. See [695 F.3d](#), at [244–245](#). See also [United States v. Atlantic States Cast Iron Pipe Co.](#), 2007 WL 2282514, at *70 (D.N.J., Aug. 2, 2007) (setting forth charges against the company). For those violations, the company was fined millions of dollars and ordered to operate under the supervision of a court-appointed monitor. See [695 F.3d](#), at [246](#).

* * *

For the reasons stated, we resist reading [§ 1519](#) expansively to create a coverall spoliation of evidence statute, advisable as such a measure might be. Leaving that important decision to Congress, we hold that a “tangible object” within [§ 1519](#)'s *1089 compass is one used to record or preserve information. The judgment of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit is therefore reversed, and the case is remanded for further proceedings.

It is so ordered.

Justice ALITO, concurring in the judgment.

This case can and should be resolved on narrow grounds. And though the question is close, traditional tools of statutory construction confirm that John Yates has the better of the argument. Three features of [18 U.S.C. § 1519](#) stand out to me: the statute's list of nouns, its

list of verbs, and its title. Although perhaps none of these features by itself would tip the case in favor of Yates, the three combined do so.

Start with the nouns. [Section 1519](#) refers to “any record, document, or tangible object.” The *noscitur a sociis* canon instructs that when a statute contains a list, each word in that list presumptively has a “similar” meaning. See, e.g., [Gustafson v. Alloyd Co.](#), 513 U.S. 561, 576, 115 S.Ct. 1061, 131 L.Ed.2d 1 (1995). A related canon, *ejusdem generis* teaches that general words following a list of specific words should usually be read in light of those specific words to mean something “similar.” See, e.g., [Christopher v. SmithKline Beecham Corp.](#), 567 U.S. —, —, 132 S.Ct. 2156, 2171, 183 L.Ed.2d 153 (2012). Applying these canons to [§ 1519](#)'s list of nouns, the term “tangible object” should refer to something similar to records or documents. A fish does not spring to mind—nor does an antelope, a colonial farmhouse, a hydrofoil, or an oil derrick. All are “objects” that are “tangible.” But who wouldn't raise an eyebrow if a neighbor, when asked to identify something similar to a “record” or “document,” said “crocodile”?

This reading, of course, has its shortcomings. For instance, this is an imperfect *ejusdem generis* case because “record” and “document” are themselves quite general. And there is a risk that “tangible object” may be made superfluous—what is similar to a “record” or “document” but yet is not one? An e-mail, however, could be such a thing. See [United States Sentencing Commission, Guidelines Manual § 2J1.2](#) and comment. (Nov. 2003) (reading “records, documents, or tangible objects” to “includ[e]” what is found on “magnetic, optical, digital, other electronic, or other storage mediums or devices”). An e-mail, after all, might not be a “document” if, as was “traditionally” so, a document was a “piece of paper with information on it,” not “information stored on a computer, electronic storage device, or any other medium.” Black's Law Dictionary 587–588 (10th ed. 2014). E-mails might also not be “records” if records are limited to “minutes” or other formal writings “designed to memorialize [past] events.” *Id.*, at 1465. A hard drive, however, is tangible and can contain files that are precisely akin to even these narrow definitions. Both “record” and “document” can be read more expansively, but adding “tangible object” to [§ 1519](#) would ensure beyond question that electronic files are included. To be sure, “tangible object” presumably can capture more than just e-mails; Congress enacts “catchall[s]” for “known unknowns.” [Republic of Iraq v. Beaty](#), 556 U.S. 848, 860, 129 S.Ct. 2183, 173 L.Ed.2d 1193 (2009). But where *noscitur a sociis* and *ejusdem generis* apply, “known unknowns” should be similar to known knowns, *i.e.*, here, records and documents. This is especially true because reading “tangible object” too broadly could render “record” and “document” superfluous.

Next, consider [§ 1519](#)'s list of verbs: “alters, destroys, mutilates, conceals, covers up, falsifies, or makes a false entry in.” *1090 Although many of those verbs could apply to nouns as far-flung as salamanders, satellites, or sand dunes, the last phrase in the list—“makes a false entry in”—makes no sense outside of filekeeping. How does one make a false entry in a fish? “Alters” and especially “falsifies” are also closely associated with filekeeping. Not one of the verbs, moreover, *cannot* be applied to filekeeping—certainly not in the way that “makes a false entry in” is always inconsistent with the aquatic.

Again, the Government is not without a response. One can imagine Congress trying to write a law so broadly that not every verb lines up with every noun. But failure to “line up” may suggest that something has gone awry in one's interpretation of a text. Where, as here, each of a statute's verbs applies to a certain category of nouns, there is some reason to think that Congress had that category in mind. Categories, of course, are often underinclusive or overinclusive—[§ 1519](#), for instance, applies to a bomb-threatening letter but not a bomb. But this does not mean that categories are not useful or that Congress does not enact them. See, e.g., [Vance v. Bradley](#), 440 U.S. 93, 108–109, 99 S.Ct. 939, 59 L.Ed.2d 171 (1979). Here, focusing on the verbs, the category of nouns appears to be filekeeping. This observation is not dispositive, but neither is it nothing. The Government also contends that [§ 1519](#)'s verbs cut both ways because it is unnatural to apply “falsifies” to tangible objects, and that is certainly true. One does not falsify the outside casing of a hard drive, but one could falsify or alter data physically recorded on that hard drive.

Finally, my analysis is influenced by [§ 1519](#)'s title: “Destruction, alteration, or falsification of *records* in Federal investigations and bankruptcy.” (Emphasis added.) This too points toward filekeeping, not fish. Titles can be useful devices to resolve “ ‘doubt about the meaning of a statute.’ ” [Porter v. Nussle](#), 534 U.S. 516, 527–528, 122 S.Ct. 983, 152 L.Ed.2d 12 (2002) (quoting [Almendarez–Torres v. United States](#), 523 U.S. 224, 234, 118 S.Ct. 1219, 140 L.Ed.2d 350 (1998)); see also [Lawson v. FMR LLC](#), 571 U.S. ———, ———, ———, 134 S.Ct. 1158, 1162–1164, 188 L.Ed.2d 158 (2014) (SOTOMAYOR, J., dissenting). The title is especially valuable here because it reinforces what the text's nouns and verbs independently suggest—that no matter how other statutes might be read, this particular one does not cover every noun in the universe with tangible form.

Titles, of course, are also not dispositive. Here, if the list of nouns did not already suggest that “tangible object” should mean something similar to records or documents, especially when read in conjunction with [§ 1519](#)'s peculiar list of verbs with their focus on filekeeping, then the title would not be enough on its own. In conjunction with those other two textual features, however, the Government's argument, though colorable, becomes too implausible to accept. See, e.g., [Washington State Dept. of Social and Health Servs. v. Guardianship Estate of Keffeler](#), 537 U.S. 371, 384–385, 123 S.Ct. 1017, 154 L.Ed.2d 972 (2003) (focusing on the “product of [two] canons of construction” which was “confirmed” by other interpretative evidence); cf. [Al–Adahi v. Obama](#), 613 F.3d 1102, 1105–1106 (C.A.D.C.2010) (aggregating evidence).

Justice KAGAN, with whom Justice SCALIA, Justice KENNEDY, and Justice THOMAS join, dissenting.

A criminal law, [18 U.S.C. § 1519](#), prohibits tampering with “any record, document, or tangible object” in an attempt to obstruct a federal investigation. This case *1091 raises the question whether the term “tangible object” means the same thing in [§ 1519](#) as it means in everyday language—any object capable of being touched. The answer should be easy: Yes. The term “tangible object” is broad, but clear. Throughout the U.S. Code and many States' laws, it invariably covers physical objects of all kinds. And in [§ 1519](#), context confirms what bare text says: All the words surrounding “tangible object” show that Congress meant the term to have a wide range. That fits with Congress's evident purpose in enacting [§ 1519](#): to punish those who alter or destroy physical evidence—*any* physical evidence—with the intent of thwarting federal law enforcement.

The plurality instead interprets “tangible object” to cover “only objects one can use to record or preserve information.” *Ante*, at 1081. The concurring opinion similarly, if more vaguely, contends that “tangible object” should refer to “something similar to records or documents”—and shouldn't include colonial farmhouses, crocodiles, or fish. *Ante*, at 1089 (ALITO, J., concurring in judgment). In my view, conventional tools of statutory construction all lead to a more conventional result: A “tangible object” is an object that's tangible. I would apply the statute that Congress enacted and affirm the judgment below.

I

While the plurality starts its analysis with [§ 1519](#)'s heading, (“We note first [§ 1519](#)'s caption”), I would begin with [§ 1519](#)'s text. When Congress has not supplied a definition, we generally give a statutory term its ordinary meaning. See, e.g., [Schindler Elevator Corp. v. United States ex rel. Kirk](#), 563 U.S. ———, ———, 131 S.Ct. 1885, 1891, 179 L.Ed.2d 825 (2011). As the plurality must acknowledge, the ordinary meaning of “tangible object” is “a discrete thing that possesses physical form.” *Ante*, at 1081 (punctuation and citation omitted). A fish is, of course, a discrete thing that possesses physical form. See generally Dr. Seuss, *One Fish Two Fish Red Fish Blue Fish* (1960). So the ordinary meaning of the term “tangible object” in [§ 1519](#), as no one here disputes, covers fish (including too-small red grouper).

That interpretation accords with endless uses of the term in statute and rule books as construed by courts. Dozens of federal laws and rules of procedure (and hundreds of state

enactments) include the term “tangible object” or its first cousin “tangible thing”—some in association with documents, others not. See, e.g., [7 U.S.C. § 8302\(2\)](#) (referring to “any material or tangible object that could harbor a pest or disease”); [15 U.S.C. § 57b-1\(c\)](#) (authorizing investigative demands for “documentary material or tangible things”); [18 U.S.C. § 668\(a\)\(1\)\(D\)](#) (defining “museum” as entity that owns “tangible objects that are exhibited to the public”); [28 U.S.C. § 2507\(b\)](#) (allowing discovery of “relevant facts, books, papers, documents or tangible things”).¹ To my knowledge, no court has ever read any such provision to exclude things that don’t record or preserve data; rather, all courts have adhered to the statutory language’s ordinary (*i.e.*, expansive) meaning. For example, courts have understood the phrases “tangible objects” and “tangible things” in the Federal Rules of Criminal and Civil Procedure to cover everything from guns to drugs to machinery to . . . animals. See, e.g., [United States v. Obiukwu](#), 17 F.3d 816, 819 (C.A.6 1994) (*per curiam*) (handgun); [United States v. Acarino](#), 270 F.Supp. 526, 527–528 (E.D.N.Y.1967) (heroin); [In re Newman](#), 782 F.2d 971, 972–975 (C.A.Fed.1986) (energy generation system); [Martin v. Reynolds Metals Corp.](#), 297 F.2d 49, 56–57 (C.A.9 1961) (cattle). No surprise, then, that—until today—courts have uniformly applied the term “tangible object” in § 1519 in the same way. See, e.g., [United States v. McRae](#), 702 F.3d 806, 834–838 (C.A.5 2012) (corpse); [United States v. Maury](#), 695 F.3d 227, 243–244 (C.A.3 2012) (cement mixer).

¹ From Alabama and Alaska through Wisconsin and Wyoming (and trust me—in all that come between), States similarly use the terms “tangible objects” and “tangible things” in statutes and rules of all sorts. See, e.g., [Ala.Code § 34-17-1\(3\) \(2010\)](#) (defining “landscape architecture” to include the design of certain “tangible objects and features”); Alaska Rule Civ. Proc. 34(a)(1) (2014) (allowing litigants to “inspect, copy, test, or sample any tangible things” that constitute or contain discoverable material); [Wis. Stat. § 804.09\(1\)](#) (2014) (requiring the production of “designated tangible things” in civil proceedings); [Wyo. Rule Crim. Proc. 41\(h\)](#) (2014) (defining “property” for purposes of a search-and-seizure statute to include “documents, books, papers and any other tangible objects”).

That is not necessarily the end of the matter; I agree with the plurality (really, who does not?) that context matters in interpreting statutes. We do not “construe the meaning of statutory terms in a vacuum.” [Tyler v. Cain](#), 533 U.S. 656, 662, 121 S.Ct. 2478, 150 L.Ed.2d 632 (2001). Rather, we interpret particular words “in their context and with a view to their place in the overall statutory scheme.” [Davis v. Michigan Dept. of Treasury](#), 489 U.S. 803, 809, 109 S.Ct. 1500, 103 L.Ed.2d 891 (1989). And sometimes that means, as the plurality says, that the dictionary definition of a disputed term cannot control. See, e.g., [Bloate v. United States](#), 559 U.S. 196, 205, n. 9, 130 S.Ct. 1345, 176 L.Ed.2d 54 (2010). But this is not such an occasion, for here the text and its context point the same way. Stepping back from the words “tangible object” provides only further evidence that Congress said what it meant and meant what it said.

Begin with the way the surrounding words in § 1519 reinforce the breadth of the term at issue. Section 1519 refers to “any” tangible object, thus indicating (in line with *that* word’s plain meaning) a tangible object “of whatever kind.” Webster’s Third New International Dictionary 97 (2002). This Court has time and again recognized that “any” has “an expansive meaning,” bringing within a statute’s reach *all* types of the item (here, “tangible object”) to which the law refers. [Department of Housing and Urban Development v. Rucker](#), 535 U.S. 125, 131, 122 S.Ct. 1230, 152 L.Ed.2d 258 (2002); see, e.g., [Republic of Iraq v. Beatty](#), 556 U.S. 848, 856, 129 S.Ct. 2183, 173 L.Ed.2d 1193 (2009); [Ali v. Federal Bureau of Prisons](#), 552 U.S. 214, 219–220, 128 S.Ct. 831, 169 L.Ed.2d 680 (2008). And the adjacent laundry list of verbs in § 1519 (“alters, destroys, mutilates, conceals, covers up, falsifies, or makes a false entry”) further shows that Congress wrote a statute with a wide scope. Those words are supposed to ensure—just as “tangible object” is meant to—that § 1519 covers the whole world of evidence-tampering, in all its prodigious variety. See [United States v. Rodgers](#), 466 U.S. 475, 480, 104 S.Ct. 1942, 80 L.Ed.2d 492 (1984) (rejecting a “narrow, technical definition” of a statutory term when it “clashes strongly” with “sweeping” language in the same sentence).

Still more, “tangible object” appears as part of a three-noun phrase (including also “records” and “documents”) common to evidence-tampering laws and always understood to embrace things of all kinds. The Model Penal Code’s evidence-tampering section, drafted more than 50 years ago, similarly prohibits a person from “alter[ing], destroy[ing],

conceal[ing] or remov[ing] *1093 any *record, document or thing*” in an effort to thwart an official investigation or proceeding. ALI, [Model Penal Code § 241.7\(1\)](#), p. 175 (1962) (emphasis added). The Code's commentary emphasizes that the offense described in that provision is “not limited to conduct that [alters] a written instrument.” *Id.*, § 241.7, Comment 3, at 179. Rather, the language extends to “any physical object.” *Ibid.* Consistent with that statement—and, of course, with ordinary meaning—courts in the more than 15 States that have laws based on the Model Code's tampering provision apply them to all tangible objects, including drugs, guns, vehicles and . . . yes, animals. See, e.g., [State v. Majors](#), 318 S.W.3d 850, 859–861 (Tenn.2010) (cocaine); [Puckett v. State](#), 328 Ark. 355, 357–360, 944 S.W.2d 111, 113–114 (1997) (gun); [State v. Bruno](#), 236 Conn. 514, 519–520, 673 A.2d 1117, 1122–1123 (1996) (bicycle, skeleton, blood stains); [State v. Crites](#), 2007 Mont. Dist. LEXIS 615, *5–*7 (Dec. 21, 2007) (deer antlers). Not a one has limited the phrase's scope to objects that record or preserve information.

The words “record, document, or tangible object” in § 1519 also track language in 18 U.S.C. § 1512, the federal witness-tampering law covering (as even the plurality accepts, see *ante*, at 1084) physical evidence in all its forms. Section 1512, both in its original version (preceding § 1519) and today, repeatedly uses the phrase “record, document, or other object”—most notably, in a provision prohibiting the use of force or threat to induce another person to withhold any of those materials from an official proceeding. § 4(a) of the Victim and Witness Protection Act of 1982, 96 Stat. 1249, as amended, 18 U.S.C. § 1512(b)(2). That language, which itself likely derived from the Model Penal Code, encompasses no less the bloody knife than the incriminating letter, as all courts have for decades agreed. See, e.g., [United States v. Kellington](#), 217 F.3d 1084, 1088 (C.A.9 2000) (boat); [United States v. Applewhaite](#), 195 F.3d 679, 688 (C.A.3 1999) (stone wall). And typically “only the most compelling evidence” will persuade this Court that Congress intended “nearly identical language” in provisions dealing with related subjects to bear different meanings. [Communications Workers v. Beck](#), 487 U.S. 735, 754, 108 S.Ct. 2641, 101 L.Ed.2d 634 (1988); see A. Scalia & B. Garner, *Reading Law: The Interpretation of Legal Texts* 252 (2012). Context thus again confirms what text indicates.

And legislative history, for those who care about it, puts extra icing on a cake already frosted. Section 1519, as the plurality notes, see *ante*, at 1079, 1081, was enacted after the Enron Corporation's collapse, as part of the Sarbanes–Oxley Act of 2002, 116 Stat. 745. But the provision began its life in a separate bill, and the drafters emphasized that Enron was “only a case study exposing the shortcomings in our current laws” relating to both “corporate and criminal” fraud. [S.Rep. No. 107–146, pp. 2, 11](#) (2002). The primary “loophole[]” Congress identified, see *id.*, at 14, arose from limits in the part of § 1512 just described: That provision, as uniformly construed, prohibited a person from inducing another to destroy “record[s], document[s], or other object[s]”—of every type—but not from doing so himself. § 1512(b)(2); see *supra*, at 1093. Congress (as even the plurality agrees, see *ante*, at 1081) enacted § 1519 to close that yawning gap. But § 1519 could fully achieve that goal only if it covered all the records, documents, and objects § 1512 did, as well as all the means of tampering with them. And so § 1519 was written to do exactly that—“to apply broadly to any acts to destroy or fabricate physical evidence,” as long as performed with the *1094 requisite intent. [S.Rep. No. 107–146, at 14](#). “When a person destroys evidence,” the drafters explained, “overly technical legal distinctions should neither hinder nor prevent prosecution.” *Id.*, at 7. Ah well: Congress, meet today's Court, which here invents just such a distinction with just such an effect. See [United States v. Philadelphia Nat. Bank](#), 374 U.S. 321, 343, 83 S.Ct. 1715, 10 L.Ed.2d 915 (1963) (“[C]reat[ing] a large loophole in a statute designed to close a loophole” is “illogical and disrespectful of . . . congressional purpose”).

As Congress recognized in using a broad term, giving immunity to those who destroy non-documentary evidence has no sensible basis in penal policy. A person who hides a murder victim's body is no less culpable than one who burns the victim's diary. A fisherman, like John Yates, who dumps undersized fish to avoid a fine is no less blameworthy than one who shreds his vessel's catch log for the same reason. Congress thus treated both offenders in the same way. It understood, in enacting § 1519, that destroying evidence is destroying evidence, whether or not that evidence takes documentary form.

II

A

The plurality searches far and wide for anything—*anything*—to support its interpretation of [§ 1519](#). But its fishing expedition comes up empty.

The plurality's analysis starts with [§ 1519](#)'s title: “Destruction, alteration, or falsification of records in Federal investigations and bankruptcy.” That's already a sign something is amiss. I know of no other case in which we have *begun* our interpretation of a statute with the title, or relied on a title to override the law's clear terms. Instead, we have followed “the wise rule that the title of a statute and the heading of a section cannot limit the plain meaning of the text.” [Trainmen v. Baltimore & Ohio R. Co.](#), 331 U.S. 519, 528–529, 67 S.Ct. 1387, 91 L.Ed. 1646 (1947).

The reason for that “wise rule” is easy to see: A title is, almost necessarily, an abridgment. Attempting to mention every term in a statute “would often be ungainly as well as useless”; accordingly, “matters in the text . . . are frequently unreflected in the headings.” [Id.](#), at 528, 67 S.Ct. 1387. Just last year, this Court observed that two titles in a nearby section of Sarbanes–Oxley serve as “but a short-hand reference to the general subject matter” of the provision at issue, “not meant to take the place of the detailed provisions of the text.” [Lawson v. FMR LLC](#), 571 U.S. ———, ———, 134 S.Ct. 1158, 1169, 188 L.Ed.2d 158 (2014) (quoting [Trainmen](#), 331 U.S., at 528, 67 S.Ct. 1387). The “under-inclusiveness” of the headings, we stated, was “apparent.” [Lawson](#), 571 U.S., at ———, 134 S.Ct., at 1169. So too for [§ 1519](#)'s title, which refers to “destruction, alteration, or falsification” but *not* to mutilation, concealment, or covering up, and likewise mentions “records” but *not* other documents or objects. Presumably, the plurality would not refuse to apply [§ 1519](#) when a person only conceals evidence rather than destroying, altering, or falsifying it; instead, the plurality would say that a title is just a title, which cannot “undo or limit” more specific statutory text. *Ibid.* (quoting [Trainmen](#), 331 U.S., at 529, 67 S.Ct. 1387). The same holds true when the evidence in question is not a “record” but something else whose destruction, alteration, etc., is intended to obstruct justice.

The plurality next tries to divine meaning from [§ 1519](#)'s “position within Chapter *1095 73 of Title 18.” But that move is yet odder than the last. As far as I can tell, this Court has never once suggested that the section number assigned to a law bears upon its meaning. Cf. Scalia, *supra*, at xi–xvi (listing more than 50 interpretive principles and canons without mentioning the plurality's new number-in-the-Code theory). And even on its own terms, the plurality's argument is hard to fathom. The plurality claims that if [§ 1519](#) applied to objects generally, Congress would not have placed it “after the pre-existing § 1516, § 1517, and § 1518” because those are “specialized provisions.” But search me if I can find a better place for a broad ban on evidence-tampering. The plurality seems to agree that the law properly goes in Chapter 73—the criminal code's chapter on “obstruction of justice.” But the provision does not logically fit into any of that chapter's pre-existing sections. And with the first 18 numbers of the chapter already taken (starting with § 1501 and continuing through § 1518), the law naturally took the 19th place. That is standard operating procedure. Prior to the Sarbanes–Oxley Act of 2002, all of Chapter 73 was ordered chronologically: Section 1518 was later enacted than § 1517, which was later enacted than § 1516, which was . . . well, you get the idea. And after Sarbanes–Oxley, Congress has continued in the same vein. [Section 1519](#) is thus right where you would expect it (as is the contemporaneously passed [§ 1520](#))—between § 1518 (added in 1996) and § 1521 (added in 2008).²

2

The lonesome exception to Chapter 73's chronological order is § 1514A, added in Sarbanes–Oxley to create a civil action to protect whistleblowers. Congress decided to place that provision right after the only other section in Chapter 73 to authorize a civil action (that one to protect victims and witnesses). The plurality, seizing on the § 1514 example, says it likewise “would have made more sense for Congress to codify the substance of § 1519 within § 1512 or in a new § 1512A.” *Ante*, at 1084, n. 4. But § 1512 is titled “Tampering with a witness, victim, or an informant,” and its provisions almost all protect witnesses from intimidation and harassment. It makes perfect sense that Congress wanted a broad ban on evidence-spoliation to stand on its own rather than as part of—or an appendage to—a witness-tampering provision.

The plurality's third argument, relying on the surplusage canon, at least invokes a known tool of statutory construction—but it too comes to nothing. Says the plurality: If read naturally, § 1519 “would render superfluous” § 1512(c)(1), which Congress passed “as part of the same act.” *Ante*, at 1085. But that is not so: Although the two provisions significantly overlap, each applies to conduct the other does not. The key difference between the two is that § 1519 protects the integrity of “matter [s] within the jurisdiction of any [federal] department or agency” whereas § 1512(c)(1) safeguards “official proceeding[s]” as defined in § 1515(a)(1)(A). Section 1519's language often applies more broadly than § 1512(c)(1)'s, as the plurality notes. For example, an FBI investigation counts as a matter within a federal department's jurisdiction, but falls outside the statutory definition of “official proceeding” as construed by courts. See, e.g., *United States v. Gabriel*, 125 F.3d 89, 105, n. 13 (C.A.2 1997). But conversely, § 1512(c)(1) sometimes reaches more widely than § 1519. For example, because an “official proceeding” includes any “proceeding before a judge or court of the United States,” § 1512(c)(1) prohibits tampering with evidence in federal litigation between private parties. See § 1515(a)(1)(A); *United States v. Burge*, 711 F.3d 803, 808–810 (C.A.7 2013); *United States v. Reich*, 479 F.3d 179, 185–187 (C.A.2 2007) (SOTOMAYOR, J.). By contrast, § 1519 wouldn't ordinarily operate in that context because *1096 a federal court isn't a “department or agency.” See *Hubbard v. United States*, 514 U.S. 695, 715, 115 S.Ct. 1754, 131 L.Ed.2d 779 (1995).³ So the surplusage canon doesn't come into play.⁴ Overlap—even significant overlap—abounds in the criminal law. See *Loughrin v. United States*, 573 U.S. _____, _____, n. 4, 134 S.Ct. 2384, 2390–2391, n. 4, 189 L.Ed.2d 411 (2014). This Court has never thought that of such ordinary stuff surplusage is made. See *ibid.*; *Connecticut Nat. Bank v. Germain*, 503 U.S. 249, 253, 112 S.Ct. 1146, 117 L.Ed.2d 391 (1992).

3

The plurality's objection to this statement is difficult to understand. It cannot take issue with *Hubbard*'s holding that “a federal court is neither a ‘department’ nor an ‘agency’” in a statute referring, just as § 1519 does, to “any matter within the jurisdiction of any department or agency of the United States.” 514 U.S., at 698, 715, 115 S.Ct. 1754. So the plurality suggests that the phrase “in relation to . . . any such matter” in § 1519 somehow changes *Hubbard*'s result. See *ante*, at 1084 – 1085, and n. 5. But that phrase still demands that evidence-tampering relate to a “matter within the jurisdiction of any department or agency”—excluding courts, as *Hubbard* commands. That is why the federal government, as far as I can tell, has never once brought a prosecution under § 1519 for evidence-tampering in litigation between private parties. It instead uses § 1512(c)(1) for that purpose.

4

Section 1512(c)(1) also applies more broadly than § 1519 in proceedings relating to insurance regulation. The term “official proceeding” in § 1512(c)(1) is defined to include “proceeding[s] involving the business of insurance whose activities affect interstate commerce before any insurance regulatory official or agency.” § 1515(a)(1)(D). But § 1519 wouldn't usually apply in that context because state, not federal, agencies handle most insurance regulation.

And the legislative history to which the plurality appeals only cuts against it because those materials show that lawmakers knew that § 1519 and § 1512(c)(1) share much common ground. Minority Leader Lott introduced the amendment that included § 1512(c)(1) (along with other criminal and corporate fraud provisions) late in the legislative process, explaining that he did so at the specific request of the President. Not only Lott but several other Senators noted the overlap between the President's package and provisions already in the bill, most notably § 1519. The presence of both § 1519 and § 1512(c)(1) in the final Act may have reflected belt-and-suspenders caution: If § 1519 contained some flaw, § 1512(c)(1) would serve as a backstop. Or the addition of § 1512(c)(1) may have derived solely from legislators' wish “to satisfy audiences other than courts”—that is, the President and his Justice Department. Gluck & Bressman, *Statutory Interpretation from the Inside*, 65 *Stan. L.Rev.* 901, 935 (2013) (emphasis deleted). Whichever the case, Congress's consciousness of overlap between the two provisions removes any conceivable reason to cast aside § 1519's ordinary meaning in service of preventing some statutory repetition.

Indeed, the inclusion of [§ 1512\(c\)\(1\)](#) in Sarbanes–Oxley creates a far worse problem for the plurality's construction of [§ 1519](#) than for mine. [Section 1512\(c\)\(1\)](#) criminalizes the destruction of any “record, document, or other object”; [§ 1519](#) of any “record, document, or tangible object.” On the plurality's view, one “object” is really an object, whereas the other is only an object that preserves or stores information. But “[t]he normal rule of statutory construction assumes that identical words used in different parts of the same act,” passed at the same time, “are intended to have the same meaning.” [Sorenson v. *1097 Secretary of Treasury](#), 475 U.S. 851, 860, 106 S.Ct. 1600, 89 L.Ed.2d 855 (1986) (internal quotation marks omitted). And that is especially true when the different provisions pertain to the same subject. See *supra*, at 1083. The plurality doesn't—really, can't—explain why it instead interprets the same words used in two provisions of the same Act addressing the same basic problem to mean fundamentally different things.

Getting nowhere with surplusage, the plurality switches canons, hoping that *noscitur a sociis* and *ejusdem generis* will save it. The first of those related canons advises that words grouped in a list be given similar meanings. The second counsels that a general term following specific words embraces only things of a similar kind. According to the plurality, those Latin maxims change the English meaning of “tangible object” to only things, like records and documents, “used to record or preserve information.”⁵ But understood as this Court always has, the canons have no such transformative effect on the workaday language Congress chose.

5

The plurality seeks support for this argument in the Sentencing Commission's construction of the phrase “records, documents, or tangible objects,” *ante*, at 1086, but to no avail. The plurality cites a note in the Commission's Manual clarifying that this phrase, as used in the Sentencing Guidelines, “includes” various electronic information, communications, and storage devices. [United States Sentencing Commission, Guidelines Manual § 2J1.2](#), comment., n. 1 (Nov. 2014) (USSG). But “includes” (following its ordinary definition) “is not exhaustive,” as the Commission's commentary makes explicit. [U.S.S.G. § 1B1.1](#), comment., n. 2. Otherwise, the Commission's construction wouldn't encompass *paper* documents. All the note does is to make plain that “records, documents, or tangible objects” embraces stuff relating to the digital (as well as the material) world.

As an initial matter, this Court uses *noscitur a sociis* and *ejusdem generis* to resolve ambiguity, not create it. Those principles are “useful rule[s] of construction where words are of obscure or doubtful meaning.” [Russell Motor Car Co. v. United States](#), 261 U.S. 514, 520, 58 Ct.Cl. 708, 43 S.Ct. 428, 67 L.Ed. 778 (1923). But when words have a clear definition, and all other contextual clues support that meaning, the canons cannot properly defeat Congress's decision to draft broad legislation. See, e.g., [Ali](#), 552 U.S., at 227, 128 S.Ct. 831 (rejecting the invocation of these canons as an “attempt to create ambiguity where the statute's text and structure suggest none”).

Anyway, assigning “tangible object” its ordinary meaning comports with *noscitur a sociis* and *ejusdem generis* when applied, as they should be, with attention to [§ 1519](#)'s subject and purpose. Those canons require identifying a common trait that links all the words in a statutory phrase. See, e.g., [Graham County Soil and Water Conservation Dist. v. United States ex rel. Wilson](#), 559 U.S. 280, 289, n. 7, 130 S.Ct. 1396, 176 L.Ed.2d 225 (2010); [Ali](#), 552 U.S., at 224–226, 128 S.Ct. 831. In responding to that demand, the plurality characterizes records and documents as things that preserve information—and so they are. But just as much, they are things that provide information, and thus potentially serve as evidence relevant to matters under review. And in a statute pertaining to obstruction of federal investigations, that evidentiary function comes to the fore. The destruction of records and documents prevents law enforcement agents from gathering facts relevant to official inquiries. And so too does the destruction of tangible objects—of whatever *1098 kind. Whether the item is a fisherman's ledger or an undersized fish, throwing it overboard has the identical effect on the administration of justice. See *supra*, at 1094. For purposes of [§ 1519](#), records, documents, and (all) tangible objects are therefore alike.

Indeed, even the plurality can't fully credit its *noscitur / ejusdem* argument. The same reasoning would apply to every law placing the word “object” (or “thing”) after “record” and “document.” But as noted earlier, such statutes are common: The phrase appears (among other places) in many state laws based on the Model Penal Code, as well as in multiple provisions of [§ 1512](#). The plurality accepts that in those laws “object” means object; its argument about superfluity positively *depends* on giving [§ 1512\(c\)\(1\)](#) that

broader reading. What, then, is the difference here? The plurality proposes that some of those statutes describe less serious offenses than [§ 1519](#). How and why that distinction affects application of the *noscitur a sociis* and *ejusdem generis* canons is left obscure: Count it as one more of the plurality's never-before-propounded, not-readily-explained interpretive theories. But in any event, that rationale cannot support the plurality's willingness to give “object” its natural meaning in [§ 1512](#), which (like [§ 1519](#)) sets out felonies with penalties of up to 20 years. See [§§ 1512\(a\)\(3\)\(C\), \(b\), \(c\)](#). The canons, in the plurality's interpretive world, apparently switch on and off whenever convenient.

And the plurality's invocation of [§ 1519](#)'s verbs does nothing to buttress its canon-based argument. The plurality observes that [§ 1519](#) prohibits “falsif[ying]” or “mak[ing] a false entry in” a tangible object, and no one can do those things to, say, a murder weapon (or a fish). But of course someone can alter, destroy, mutilate, conceal, or cover up such a tangible object, and [§ 1519](#) prohibits those actions too. The Court has never before suggested that all the verbs in a statute need to match up with all the nouns. See [Roberts v. United States](#), 572 U.S. _____, _____, 134 S.Ct. 1854, 1858, 188 L.Ed.2d 885 (2014) (“[T]he law does not require legislators to write extra language specifically exempting, phrase by phrase, applications in respect to which a portion of a phrase is not needed”). And for good reason. It is exactly when Congress sets out to draft a statute broadly—to include every imaginable variation on a theme—that such mismatches will arise. To respond by narrowing the law, as the plurality does, is thus to flout both what Congress wrote and what Congress wanted.

Finally, when all else fails, the plurality invokes the rule of lenity. But even in its most robust form, that rule only kicks in when, “after all legitimate tools of interpretation have been exhausted, ‘a reasonable doubt persists’ regarding whether Congress has made the defendant's conduct a federal crime.” [Abramski v. United States](#), 573 U.S. _____, _____, 134 S.Ct. 2259, 2281, 189 L.Ed.2d 262 (2014) (SCALIA, J., dissenting) (quoting [Moskal v. United States](#), 498 U.S. 103, 108, 111 S.Ct. 461, 112 L.Ed.2d 449 (1990)). No such doubt lingers here. The plurality points to the breadth of [§ 1519](#), as though breadth were equivalent to ambiguity. It is not. [Section 1519](#) is very broad. It is also very clear. Every traditional tool of statutory interpretation points in the same direction, toward “object” meaning object. Lenity offers no *1099 proper refuge from that straightforward (even though capacious) construction.⁶

6

As part of its lenity argument, the plurality asserts that Yates did not have “fair warning” that his conduct amounted to a felony. *Ante*, at 1088; see *ante*, at 1087 (stating that “Yates would have had scant reason to anticipate a felony prosecution” when throwing fish overboard). But even under the plurality's view, the dumping of fish is potentially a federal felony—just under [§ 1512\(c\)\(1\)](#), rather than [§ 1519](#). See *ante*, at 1084 – 1085. In any event, the plurality itself acknowledges that the ordinary meaning of [§ 1519](#) covers Yates's conduct, see *ante*, at 1081: That provision, no less than [§ 1512\(c\)\(1\)](#), announces its broad scope in the clearest possible terms. And when an ordinary citizen seeks notice of a statute's scope, he is more likely to focus on the plain text than (as the plurality would have it) on the section number, the superfluity principle, and the *noscitur* and *ejusdem* canons.

B

The concurring opinion is a shorter, vaguer version of the plurality's. It relies primarily on the *noscitur a sociis* and *ejusdem generis* canons, tries to bolster them with [§ 1519](#)'s “list of verbs,” and concludes with the section's title. See *supra*, at 1094, 1097 – 1098, 1098 (addressing each of those arguments). (Notably, even the concurrence puts no stock in the plurality's section-number and superfluity claims.) From those familiar materials, the concurrence arrives at the following definition: “‘tangible object’ should mean something similar to records or documents.” In amplifying that purported guidance, the concurrence suggests applying the term “tangible object” in keeping with what “a neighbor, when asked to identify something similar to record or document,” might answer. “[W]ho wouldn't raise an eyebrow,” the concurrence wonders, if the neighbor said “crocodile”? Courts sometimes say, when explaining the Latin maxims, that the “words of a statute should be interpreted consistent with their neighbors.” See, e.g., [United States v. Locke](#), 529 U.S. 89, 105, 120 S.Ct. 1135, 146 L.Ed.2d 69 (2000). The concurrence takes that expression literally.

But § 1519's meaning should not hinge on the odd game of Mad Libs the concurrence proposes. No one reading § 1519 needs to fill in a blank after the words “records” and “documents.” That is because Congress, quite helpfully, already did so—adding the term “tangible object.” The issue in this case is what that term means. So if the concurrence wishes to ask its neighbor a question, I'd recommend a more pertinent one: Do you think a fish (or, if the concurrence prefers, a crocodile) is a “tangible object”? As to that query, “who wouldn't raise an eyebrow” if the neighbor said “no”?

In insisting on its different question, the concurrence neglects the proper function of catchall phrases like “or tangible object.” The reason Congress uses such terms is precisely to reach things that, in the concurrence's words, “do[] not spring to mind”—to my mind, to my neighbor's, or (most important) to Congress's. As this Court recently explained: “[T]he whole value of a generally phrased residual [term] is that it serves as a catchall for matters not specifically contemplated—known unknowns.” *Beatty*, 556 U.S., at 860, 129 S.Ct. 2183. Congress realizes that in a game of free association with “record” and “document,” it will never think of all the other things—including crocodiles and fish—whose destruction or alteration can (less frequently but just as effectively) thwart law enforcement. Cf. *United States v. Stubbs*, 11 F.3d 632, 637–638 (C.A.6 1993) (dead crocodiles used as *1100 evidence to support smuggling conviction). And so Congress adds the general term “or tangible object”—again, exactly because such things “do[] not spring to mind.”⁷

⁷ The concurrence contends that when the *noscitur* and *ejusdem* canons are in play, “‘known unknowns’ should be similar to known knows, *i.e.*, here, records and documents.” But as noted above, records and documents *are* similar to crocodiles and fish as far as § 1519 is concerned: All are potentially useful as evidence in an investigation. The concurrence never explains why *that* similarity isn't the relevant one in a statute aimed at evidence-tampering.

The concurrence suggests that the term “tangible object” serves not as a catchall for physical evidence but to “ensure beyond question” that e-mails and other electronic files fall within § 1519's compass. *Ante*, at 1089. But that claim is eyebrow-raising in its own right. Would a Congress wishing to make certain that § 1519 applies to e-mails add the phrase “tangible object” (as opposed, say, to “electronic communications”)? Would a judge or jury member predictably find that “tangible object” encompasses something as virtual as e-mail (as compared, say, with something as real as a fish)? If not (and the answer is not), then that term cannot function as a failsafe for e-mails.

The concurrence acknowledges that no one of its arguments can carry the day; rather, it takes the Latin canons plus § 1519's verbs plus § 1519's title to “tip the case” for Yates. *Ante*, at 1089. But the sum total of three mistaken arguments is . . . three mistaken arguments. They do not get better in the combining. And so the concurrence ends up right where the plurality does, except that the concurrence, eschewing the rule of lenity, has nothing to fall back on.

III

If none of the traditional tools of statutory interpretation can produce today's result, then what accounts for it? The plurality offers a clue when it emphasizes the disproportionate penalties § 1519 imposes if the law is read broadly. Section 1519, the plurality objects, would then “expose[] individuals to 20–year prison sentences for tampering with *any* physical object that *might* have evidentiary value in *any* federal investigation into *any* offense.” That brings to the surface the real issue: overcriminalization and excessive punishment in the U.S. Code.

Now as to this statute, I think the plurality somewhat—though only somewhat—exaggerates the matter. The plurality omits from its description of § 1519 the requirement that a person act “knowingly” and with “the intent to impede, obstruct, or influence” federal law enforcement. And in highlighting § 1519's maximum penalty, the plurality glosses over the absence of any prescribed minimum. (Let's not forget that Yates's sentence was not 20 years, but 30 days.) Congress presumably enacts laws with high maximums and no minimums when it thinks the prohibited conduct may run the gamut

from major to minor. That is assuredly true of acts obstructing justice. Compare this case with the following, all of which properly come within, but now fall outside, [§ 1519: *McRae*, 702 F.3d, at 834–838](#) (burning human body to thwart murder investigation); [Maury, 695 F.3d, at 243–244](#) (altering cement mixer to impede inquiry into amputation of employee's fingers); *United States v. Natal*, 2014 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 108852, *24–*26 (D.Conn., Aug. 7, 2014) (repainting van to cover up evidence of fatal arson). Most district judges, as Congress knows, will recognize differences between such cases and prosecutions like this one, *1101 and will try to make the punishment fit the crime. Still and all, I tend to think, for the reasons the plurality gives, that [§ 1519](#) is a bad law—too broad and undifferentiated, with too-high maximum penalties, which give prosecutors too much leverage and sentencers too much discretion. And I'd go further: In those ways, [§ 1519](#) is unfortunately not an outlier, but an emblem of a deeper pathology in the federal criminal code.

But whatever the wisdom or folly of [§ 1519](#), this Court does not get to rewrite the law. “Resolution of the pros and cons of whether a statute should sweep broadly or narrowly is for Congress.” [Rodgers, 466 U.S., at 484, 104 S.Ct. 1942](#). If judges disagree with Congress's choice, we are perfectly entitled to say so—in lectures, in law review articles, and even in dicta. But we are not entitled to replace the statute Congress enacted with an alternative of our own design.

I respectfully dissent.

Justice WHITE, with whom Justice STEVENS joins, concurring in part, dissenting in part, and concurring in the judgment.

.... Petitioners seek to rely on legislative history, but it does not help their position. There is little legislative history discussing the definition of “employee” in the ADEA, so petitioners point to the legislative history of the identical definition in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, [42 U.S.C. § 2000e\(f\)](#). If anything, that history tends to confirm that the “appointee[s] on the policymaking level” exception was designed to exclude from the coverage of the ADEA all high-level appointments throughout state government structures, including judicial appointments.

For example, during the debates concerning the proposed extension of Title VII to the States, Senator Ervin repeatedly expressed his concern that the (unamended) definition of “employee” would be construed to reach those “persons who exercise the legislative, executive, *and judicial* powers of the States and political subdivisions of the States.” 118 Cong.Rec. 1838 (1972) (emphasis added). Indeed, he expressly complained that “[t]here is not even an exception in the [unamended] bill to the effect that the EEOC will not have jurisdiction over ... State judges, whether they are elected or appointed to office.” *Id.*, at 1677. Also relevant is Senator Taft's comment that, in order to respond to Senator Ervin's concerns, he was willing to agree to an exception not only for elected officials, but also for “those at the top decisionmaking levels in the executive and judicial branch as well.” *Id.*, at 1838.

The definition of “employee” subsequently was modified to exclude the four categories of employees discussed above. The Conference Committee that added the “appointee[s] on the policymaking level” exception made clear the separate nature of that exception:

“It is the intention of the conferees to exempt elected officials and members of their personal staffs, and persons appointed by such elected officials as advisors *or* to policymaking positions at *the highest levels* of the departments or agencies of State or local governments, such as *485 cabinet officers, and persons with comparable **2414 responsibilities at the local level.” H.R.Conf.Rep. No. 92–899, pp. 15–16 (1972). R.Conf.Rep. No. 92–899, pp. 15–16 (1972) (emphasis added).

The italicized “or” in that statement indicates, contrary to petitioners' argument, that appointed officials need not be advisers to be covered by the exception. Rather, it appears that “Congress intended two categories: policymakers, who need not be advisers; and advisers, who need not be policymakers.” [EEOC v. Massachusetts, 858 F.2d 52, 56 \(CA1 1988\)](#). This reading is confirmed by a statement by one of the House Managers, Representative Erlenborn, who explained that “[i]n the conference, an additional qualification was added, exempting those people appointed by officials at the State and local level in policymaking positions.” 118 Cong.Rec., at 7567.

In addition, the phrase “the highest levels” in the Conference Report suggests that Congress' intent was to limit the exception “down the chain of command, and not so much across agencies or departments.” [EEOC v. Massachusetts, 858 F.2d, at 56](#). I also agree with the First Circuit's conclusion that even lower court judges fall within the exception because “each judge, as a separate and independent judicial officer, is at the very top of his particular ‘policymaking’ chain of command, responding ... only to a higher appellate court.” *Ibid.*

....

Justice BLACKMUN, with whom Justice MARSHALL joins, dissenting.

I agree entirely with the cogent analysis contained in Part I of Justice WHITE's opinion, ante. For the reasons well stated by Justice WHITE, the question we must resolve is whether appointed Missouri state judges are excluded from the general prohibition of mandatory retirement that Congress established in the Federal Age Discrimination in Employment Act (ADEA), 29 U.S.C. ss 621-634. I part company with Justice WHITE, however, in his determination that appointed state judges fall within the narrow exclusion from ADEA coverage that Congress created for an "appointee on the policymaking level." 29 U.S.C. s 630(f).

I

For two reasons, I do not accept the notion that an appointed state judge is an "appointee on the policymaking level." First, even assuming that judges may be described as policymakers in certain circumstances, the structure and legislative history of the policymaker exclusion make clear that judges are not the kind of policymakers whom Congress intended to exclude from the ADEA's broad reach. Second, whether or not a plausible argument may be made for judges' being policymakers, I would defer to the EEOC's reasonable construction of the ADEA as covering appointed state judges.

A

Although it may be possible to define an appointed judge as a "policymaker" with only a dictionary as a guide, [FN1] we have an obligation to construe the exclusion of an "appointee on the policymaking level" with a sensitivity to the context in which Congress placed it. In construing an undefined statutory term, this Court has adhered steadfastly to the rule that "'words grouped in a list should be given related meaning.'" *Dole v. Steelworkers*, 494 U.S. 26, ---, 110 S.Ct. 929, 930, 108 L.Ed.2d 23 (1990), quoting *Massachusetts v. Morash*, 490 U.S. 107, 114-115, 109 S.Ct. 1668, 1672-1673, 104 L.Ed.2d 98 (1989), quoting *Schreiber v. Burlington Northern, Inc.*, 472 U.S. 1, 8, 105 S.Ct. 2458, 2462, 86 L.Ed.2d 1 (1985), quoting *Securities Industry Assn. v. Board of Governors, FRS*, 468 U.S. 207, 218, 104 S.Ct. 3003, 3009, 82 L.Ed.2d 158 (1984), and that "'in expounding a statute, we [are] not ... guided by a single sentence or member of a sentence, but look to the provisions of the whole law, and to its object and policy.'" *Morash*, 490 U.S., at 115, 109 S.Ct., at 1673, quoting *Pilot Life Insurance Co. v. Dedeaux*, 481 U.S. 41, 51, 107 S.Ct. 1549, 1554-1555, 95 L.Ed.2d 39 (1987). Applying these maxims of statutory construction, I conclude that an appointed state judge is not the kind of "policymaker" whom Congress intended to exclude from the protection of the ADEA.

FN1. Justice WHITE finds the dictionary definition of "policymaker" broad enough to include the Missouri judges involved in this case, because judges resolve disputes by choosing "'from among alternatives' and elaborate their choices in order 'to guide and ... determine present and future decisions.'" Ante, at 2413. See also *Gregory v. Ashcroft*, 898 F.2d 598, 601 (CA8 1990), quoting *EEOC v. Massachusetts*, 858 F.2d 52, 55 (CA1 1988). I hesitate to classify judges as policymakers, even at this level of abstraction. Although some part of a judge's task may be to fill in the interstices of legislative enactments, the primary task of a judicial officer is to apply rules reflecting the policy choices made by, or on behalf of, those elected to legislative and executive positions. A judge is first and foremost one who resolves disputes, and not one charged with the duty to fashion broad policies establishing the rights and duties of citizens. That task is reserved primarily for legislators. See *EEOC v. Vermont*, 904 F.2d 794, 800-801 (CA2 1990). Nor am I persuaded that judges should be considered policymakers because they sometimes fashion court rules and are otherwise involved in the administration of the state judiciary. See *In re Stout*, 521 Pa. 571, 583-586, 559 A.2d 489, 495-497 (1989). These housekeeping tasks are at most ancillary to a judge's primary function described above.

The policymaker exclusion is placed between the exclusion of "any person chosen by such [elected] officer to be on such officer's personal staff" and the exclusion of "an immediate advisor with respect to the exercise of the constitutional or legal powers of the office." See 29 U.S.C. s 630(f). Reading the policymaker exclusion in light of the other categories of employees listed with it, I conclude that the class of "appointee[s] on the policymaking level" should be limited to those officials who share the characteristics of personal staff members and immediate advisers, i.e., those who work closely with the appointing official and are directly accountable to that official. Additionally, I agree with the reasoning of the Second Circuit in *EEOC v. Vermont*, 904 F.2d 794 (1990): "Had Congress intended to except a wide-ranging category of policymaking individuals operating wholly independently of the elected official, it would probably have placed that expansive category at the end of the series, not in the middle." *Id.*, at 798. Because appointed judges are not accountable to the official who appoints them and are precluded from working closely with that official once they have been appointed, they are not "appointee[s] on the policymaking level" for purposes of 29 U.S.C. s 630(f). [FN2]

FN2. I disagree with Justice WHITE's suggestion that this reading of the policymaking exclusion renders it superfluous. *Ante*, at 2413-2414. There exist policymakers who work closely with an appointing official but who are appropriately classified as neither members of his "personal staff" nor "immediate adviser[s] with respect to the exercise of the constitutional or legal powers of the office." Among others, certain members of the Governor's Cabinet and high level state agency officials well might be covered by the policymaking exclusion, as I construe it.

B

The evidence of Congress' intent in enacting the policymaking exclusion supports this narrow reading. As noted by Justice WHITE, *ante*, at 2413, there is little in the legislative history of s 630(f) itself to aid our interpretive endeavor. Because Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, s 701(f), as amended, 42 U.S.C. s 2000e(f), contains language identical to that in the ADEA's policymaking exclusion, however, we accord substantial weight to the legislative history of the cognate Title VII provision in construing s 630(f). See *Lorillard v. Pons*, 434 U.S. 575, 584, 98 S.Ct. 866, 872, 55 L.Ed.2d 40 (1978) (noting that "the prohibitions of the ADEA were derived in haec verba from Title VII"). See also *Trans World Airlines, Inc. v. Thurston*, 469 U.S. 111, 121, 105 S.Ct. 613, 621-622, 83 L.Ed.2d 523 (1985); *Oscar Mayer & Co. v. Evans*, 441 U.S. 750, 756, 99 S.Ct. 2066, 2071- 2072, 60 L.Ed.2d 609 (1979); *EEOC v. Vermont*, 904 F.2d, at 798.

When Congress decided to amend Title VII to include States and local governments as employers, the original bill did not contain any employee exclusion. As Justice WHITE notes, *ante*, at 2413, the absence of a provision excluding certain state employees was a matter of concern for Senator Ervin, who commented that the bill, as reported, did not contain a provision "to the effect that the EEOC will not have jurisdiction over ... State judges, whether they are elected or appointed to office...." 118 Cong.Rec. 1677 (1972). Because this floor comment refers to appointed judges, Justice WHITE concludes that the later amendment containing the exclusion of "an appointee on the policymaking level" was drafted in "response to the concerns raised by Senator Ervin and others," *ante*, at 2413, and therefore should be read to include judges.

Even if the only legislative history available was the above-quoted statement of Senator Ervin and the final amendment containing the policymaking exclusion, I would be reluctant to accept Justice WHITE's analysis. It would be odd to conclude that the general exclusion of those "on the policymaking level" was added in response to Senator Ervin's very specific concern about appointed judges. Surely, if Congress had desired to exclude judges--and was responding to a specific complaint that judges would be within the jurisdiction of the EEOC--it would have chosen far clearer language to accomplish this end. [FN3] In any case, a more detailed look at the genesis of the policymaking exclusion seriously undermines the suggestion that it was intended to include appointed judges.

FN3. The majority acknowledges this anomaly by noting that " 'appointee [on] the

policymaking level,' particularly in the context of the other exceptions that surround it, is an odd way for Congress to exclude judges; a plain statement that judges are not 'employees' would seem the most efficient phrasing." Ante, at 2404. The majority dismisses this objection not by refuting it, but by noting that "we are not looking for a plain statement that judges are excluded." Ibid. For the reasons noted in Part I of Justice WHITE's opinion, this reasoning is faulty; appointed judges are covered unless they fall within the enumerated exclusions.

After commenting on the absence of an employee exclusion, Senator Ervin proposed the following amendment: "[T]he term 'employee' as set forth in the original act of 1964 and as modified in the pending bill shall not include any person elected to public office in any State or political subdivision of any State by the qualified voters thereof, or any person chosen by such person to advise him in respect to the exercise of the constitutional or legal powers of his office." 118 Cong.Rec. 4483 (1972). Noticeably absent from this proposed amendment is any reference to those on the policymaking level or to judges. Senator Williams then suggested expanding the proposed amendment to include the personal staff of the elected individual, leading Senators Williams and Ervin to engage in the following discussion about the purpose of the amendment: "Mr. WILLIAMS: "First, State and local governments are now included under the bill as employers. The amendment would provide, for the purposes of the bill and for the basic law, that an elected individual is not an employee and, th[er]efore, the law could not cover him. The next point is that the elected official would, in his position as an employer, not be covered and would be exempt in the employment of certain individuals.

"... [B]asically the purpose of the amendment ... [is] to exempt from coverage those who are chosen by the Governor or the mayor or the county supervisor, whatever the elected official is, and who are in a close personal relationship and an immediate relationship with him. Those who are his first line of advisers. Is that basically the purpose of the Senator's amendment?" Mr. ERVIN: I would say to my good friend from New Jersey that that is the purpose of the amendment." Id., at 4492-4493.

Following this exchange, Senator Ervin's amendment was expanded to exclude "any person chosen by such officer to be a personal assistant." Id., at 4493. The Senate adopted these amendments, voting to exclude both personal staff members and immediate advisers from the scope of Title VII.

The policymaker exclusion appears to have arisen from Senator Javits' concern that the exclusion for advisers would sweep too broadly, including hundreds of functionaries such as "lawyers, ... stenographers, subpoena servers, researchers, and so forth." Id., at 4097. Senator Javits asked "to have overnight to check into what would be the status of that rather large group of employees," noting that he "realize[d] that ... Senator [Ervin was] ... seeking to confine it to the higher officials in a policymaking or policy advising capacity." Ibid. In an effort to clarify his point, Senator Javits later stated: "The other thing, the immediate advisers, I was thinking more in terms of a cabinet, of a Governor who would call his commissioners a cabinet, or he may have a cabinet composed of three or four executive officials, or five or six, who would do the main and important things. That is what I would define these things expressly to mean." Id., at 4493.

Although Senator Ervin assured Senator Javits that the exclusion of personal staff and advisers affected only the classes of employees that Senator Javits had mentioned, *ibid.*, the Conference Committee eventually adopted a specific exclusion of an "appointee on the policymaking level" as well as the exclusion of personal staff and immediate advisers contained in the Senate bill. In explaining the scope of the exclusion, the conferees stated: "It is the intention of the conferees to exempt elected officials and members of their personal staffs, and persons appointed by such officials as advisors or to policymaking positions at the highest levels of the departments or agencies of State or local governments, such as cabinet officers, and persons with comparable responsibilities at the local level. It is the conferees['] intent that this exemption shall be construed narrowly." S.Conf.Rep. No. 92-681, pp. 15-16 (1972).

The foregoing history decisively refutes the argument that the policymaker exclusion was added in response to Senator Ervin's concern that appointed state judges would be protected by Title VII. Senator Ervin's own proposed amendment did not exclude those on the policymaking level. Indeed, Senator Ervin indicated that all of the policymakers he sought to have excluded from the coverage of Title VII were encompassed in the exclusion of personal staff and immediate advisers. It is obvious that judges are neither staff nor immediate advisers of any elected official. The only indication as to whom Congress understood to be "appointee[s] on the policymaking level" is Senator Javits' reference to members of the Governor's cabinet, echoed in the Conference Committee's use of "cabinet officers" as an example of the type of appointee at the policymaking level excluded from Title VII's definition of "employee." When combined with the Conference Committee's exhortation that the exclusion be construed narrowly, this evidence indicates that Congress did not intend appointed state judges to be excluded from the reach of Title VII or the ADEA.

C

[discussion of deference to agency omitted]

II

The Missouri constitutional provision mandating the retirement of a judge who reaches the age of 70 violates the ADEA and is, therefore, invalid. [FN5] Congress enacted the ADEA with the express purpose "to promote employment of older persons based on their ability rather than age; to prohibit arbitrary age discrimination in employment; to help employers and workers find ways of meeting problems arising from the impact of age on employment." 29 U.S.C. § 621. Congress provided for only limited exclusions from the coverage of the ADEA, and exhorted courts applying this law to construe such exclusions narrowly. The statute's structure and legislative history reveal that Congress did not intend an appointed state judge to be beyond the scope of the ADEA's protective reach. Further, the EEOC, which is charged with the enforcement of the ADEA, has determined that an appointed state judge is covered by the ADEA. This Court's precedent dictates that we defer to the EEOC's permissible interpretation of the ADEA.

FN5. Because I conclude that the challenged Missouri constitutional provision violates the ADEA, I need not consider petitioners' alternative argument that the mandatory retirement provision violates the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. See *Carnival Cruise Lines, Inc. v. Shute*, --- U.S. ----, ----, 111 S.Ct. 1522, ----, 113 L.Ed.2d 622 (1991).

I dissent.

134 S.Ct. 2077
Supreme Court of the United States

Carol Anne BOND, Petitioner

v.

UNITED STATES.

No. 12–158.

Argued Nov. 5, 2013.

Decided June 2, 2014.

[[ROBERTS](#), C.J., delivered the opinion of the Court, in which [KENNEDY](#), [GINSBURG](#), [BREYER](#), [SOTOMAYOR](#), and [KAGAN](#), JJ., joined. [SCALIA](#), J., filed an opinion concurring in the judgment, in which [THOMAS](#), J., joined, and in which [ALITO](#), J., joined as to Part I. [THOMAS](#), J., filed an opinion concurring in the judgment, in which [SCALIA](#), J., joined, and in which [ALITO](#), J., joined as to Parts I, II, and III. [ALITO](#), J., filed an opinion concurring in the judgment.]

Chief Justice [ROBERTS](#) delivered the opinion of the Court.

[To implement the international Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling, and Use of Chemical Weapons and on Their Destruction, Congress enacted the Chemical Weapons Convention Implementation Act of 1998. The statute forbids, among other things, any person knowingly to “possess [] or use ... any chemical weapon,” [18 U.S.C. § 229\(a\)\(1\)](#). A “chemical weapon” is “[a] toxic chemical and its precursors, except where intended for a purpose not prohibited under this chapter.” § 229F(1)(A). A “toxic chemical” is “any chemical which through its chemical action on life processes can cause death, temporary **2081 incapacitation or permanent harm to humans or animals. The term includes all such chemicals, regardless of their origin or of their method of production, and regardless of whether they are produced in facilities, in munitions or elsewhere.” § 229F(8)(A). “[P]urposes not prohibited by this chapter” is defined as “[a]ny peaceful purpose related to an industrial, agricultural, research, medical, or pharmaceutical activity or other activity,” and other specific purposes. § 229F(7).

[Petitioner Bond sought revenge against Myrlinda Haynes—with whom her husband had carried on an affair—by spreading two toxic chemicals on Haynes's car, mailbox, and door knob in hopes that Haynes would develop an uncomfortable rash. On one occasion Haynes suffered a minor chemical burn that she treated by rinsing with water, but Bond's attempted assaults were otherwise entirely unsuccessful. Federal prosecutors charged Bond with violating, among other things, [section 229\(a\)](#).]

....

II

In our federal system, the National Government possesses only limited powers; the States and the people retain the remainder. The States have broad authority to enact legislation for the public good—what we have often called a “police power.” [United States v. Lopez](#), 514 U.S. 549, 567, 115 S.Ct. 1624, 131 L.Ed.2d 626 (1995). The Federal Government, by contrast, has no such authority and “can exercise only the powers granted to it,” [McCulloch v. Maryland](#), 4 Wheat. 316, 405, 4 L.Ed. 579 (1819), including the power to make “all Laws which shall be necessary and proper for carrying into Execution” the enumerated powers, [U.S. Const., Art. I, § 8, cl. 18](#). For nearly two centuries it has been “clear” that, lacking a police power, “Congress cannot punish felonies generally.” [Cohens v. Virginia](#), 6 Wheat. 264, 428, 5 L.Ed. 257 (1821). A criminal act committed wholly within a State “cannot be made an offence against the United States, unless it have some relation to the execution of a power of Congress, or to some matter within the jurisdiction of the United States.” [United States v. Fox](#), 95 U.S. 670, 672, 24 L.Ed. 538 (1878).

**2087 The Government frequently defends federal criminal legislation on the ground that the legislation is authorized pursuant to Congress's power to regulate interstate commerce. In this case, however, the Court of Appeals held that the Government had explicitly disavowed that argument before *855 the [District Court. 681 F.3d, at 151, n. 1](#). As a result, in this Court the parties have devoted significant effort to arguing whether [section 229](#), as applied to Bond's offense, is a necessary and proper means of executing the National Government's power to make treaties. [U.S. Const., Art. II, § 2, cl. 2](#). Bond argues that the lower court's reading of *Missouri v. Holland* would remove all limits on federal authority, so long as the Federal Government ratifies a treaty first. She insists that to effectively afford the Government a police power whenever it implements a treaty would be contrary to the Framers' careful decision to divide power between the States and the National Government as a means of preserving liberty. To the extent that *Holland* authorizes such usurpation of traditional state authority, Bond says, it must be either limited or overruled.

The Government replies that this Court has never held that a statute implementing a valid treaty exceeds Congress's enumerated powers. To do so here, the Government says, would contravene another deliberate choice of the Framers: to avoid placing subject matter limitations on the National Government's power to make treaties. And it might also undermine confidence in the United States as an international treaty partner.

Notwithstanding this debate, it is “a well-established principle governing the prudent exercise of this Court's jurisdiction that normally the Court will not decide a constitutional question if there is some other ground upon which to dispose of the case.” [Escambia County v. McMillan, 466 U.S. 48, 51, 104 S.Ct. 1577, 80 L.Ed.2d 36 \(1984\)](#) (*per curiam*); see also [Ashwander v. TVA, 297 U.S. 288, 347, 56 S.Ct. 466, 80 L.Ed. 688 \(1936\)](#) (Brandeis, J., concurring). Bond argues that [section 229](#) does not cover her conduct. So we consider that argument first.

III

[Section 229](#) exists to implement the Convention, so we begin with that international agreement. As explained, the Convention's drafters intended for it to be a comprehensive *856 ban on chemical weapons. But even with its broadly worded definitions, we have doubts that a treaty about *chemical weapons* has anything to do with Bond's conduct. The Convention, a product of years of worldwide study, analysis, and multinational negotiation, arose in response to war crimes and acts of terrorism. See Kenyon & Feakes 6. There is no reason to think the sovereign nations that ratified the Convention were interested in anything like Bond's common law assault.

Even if the treaty does reach that far, nothing prevents Congress from implementing the Convention in the same manner it legislates with respect to innumerable other matters—observing the Constitution's division of responsibility between sovereigns and leaving the prosecution of purely local crimes to the States. The Convention, after all, is agnostic between enforcement at the state versus federal level: It provides that “[e]ach State Party shall, *in accordance with its constitutional processes*, adopt the necessary measures to implement its obligations under this Convention.” Art. VII(1), 1974 U.N.T.S. 331 (emphasis added); see also Tabassi, National Implementation: Article VII, in Kenyon & Feakes 205, 207 (“Since the creation of **2088 national law, the enforcement of it and the structure and administration of government are all sovereign acts reserved exclusively for [State Parties], it is not surprising that the Convention is so vague on the critical matter of national implementation.”).

Fortunately, we have no need to interpret the scope of the Convention in this case. Bond was prosecuted under [section 229](#), and the statute—unlike the Convention—must be read consistent with principles of federalism inherent in our constitutional structure.

In the Government's view, the conclusion that Bond “knowingly” “use[d]” a “chemical weapon” in violation of [§ section 229\(a\)](#) is simple: The chemicals that Bond placed on Haynes's home and car are “toxic chemical[s]” as defined by *857 the statute, and Bond's attempt to assault Haynes was not a “peaceful purpose.” §§ 229F(1), (8), (7). The problem with this interpretation is that it would “dramatically intrude[] upon traditional state criminal jurisdiction,” and we avoid reading statutes to have such reach in the absence of a clear indication that they do. [§ United States v. Bass, 404 U.S. 336, 350, 92 S.Ct. 515, 30 L.Ed.2d 488 \(1971\).](#)

Part of a fair reading of statutory text is recognizing that “Congress legislates against the backdrop” of certain unexpressed presumptions. [§ EEOC v. Arabian American Oil Co., 499 U.S. 244, 248, 111 S.Ct. 1227, 113 L.Ed.2d 274 \(1991\).](#) As Justice Frankfurter put it in his famous essay on statutory interpretation, correctly reading a statute “demands awareness of certain presuppositions.” *Some Reflections on the Reading of Statutes*, 47 Colum. L. Rev. 527, 537 (1947). For example, we presume that a criminal statute derived from the common law carries with it the requirement of a culpable mental state—even if no such limitation appears in the text—unless it is clear that the Legislature intended to impose strict liability. [§ United States v. United States Gypsum Co., 438 U.S. 422, 437, 98 S.Ct. 2864, 57 L.Ed.2d 854 \(1978\).](#) To take another example, we presume, absent a clear statement from Congress, that federal statutes do not apply outside the United States. [§ Morrison v. National Australia Bank Ltd., 561 U.S. 247, 255, 130 S.Ct. 2869, 177 L.Ed.2d 535 \(2010\).](#) So even though [§ section 229](#), read on its face, would cover a chemical weapons crime if committed by a U.S. citizen in Australia, we would not apply the statute to such conduct absent a plain statement from Congress.¹ The notion that some things “go without saying” applies to legislation just as it does to everyday life.

¹ Congress has in fact included just such a plain statement in [§ section 229\(c\)\(2\)](#): “Conduct prohibited by [[§ section 229\(a\)](#)] is within the jurisdiction of the United States if the prohibited conduct ... takes place outside of the United States and is committed by a national of the United States.”

Among the background principles of construction that our cases have recognized are those grounded in the relationship between the Federal Government and the States under our *858 Constitution. It has long been settled, for example, that we presume federal statutes do not abrogate state sovereign immunity, [§ Atascadero State Hospital v. Scanlon, 473 U.S. 234, 243, 105 S.Ct. 3142, 87 L.Ed.2d 171 \(1985\)](#), impose obligations on the States pursuant to [section 5](#) of the Fourteenth Amendment, [§ Pennhurst State School and Hospital v. Halderman, 451 U.S. 1, 16–17, 101 S.Ct. 1531, 67 L.Ed.2d 694 \(1981\)](#), or preempt state law, [§ **2089 Rice v. Santa Fe Elevator Corp., 331 U.S. 218, 230, 67 S.Ct. 1146, 91 L.Ed. 1447 \(1947\).](#)

Closely related to these is the well-established principle that “‘it is incumbent upon the federal courts to be certain of Congress' intent before finding that federal law overrides’” the “usual constitutional balance of federal and state powers.” [§ Gregory v. Ashcroft, 501 U.S. 452, 460, 111 S.Ct. 2395, 115 L.Ed.2d 410 \(1991\)](#) (quoting [§ Atascadero, supra](#), at 243, 105 S.Ct. 3142). To quote Frankfurter again, if the Federal Government would “‘radically readjust[] the balance of state and national authority, those charged with the duty of legislating [must be] reasonably explicit’” about it. [§ BFP v. Resolution Trust Corporation, 511 U.S. 531, 544, 114 S.Ct. 1757, 128 L.Ed.2d 556 \(1994\)](#) (quoting *Some Reflections*, [§ supra](#), at 539–540; second alteration in original). Or as explained by Justice Marshall, when legislation “affect[s] the federal balance, the requirement of clear statement assures that the legislature has in fact faced, and intended to bring into issue, the critical matters involved in the judicial decision.” [§ Bass, supra](#), at 349, 92 S.Ct. 515.

We have applied this background principle when construing federal statutes that touched on several areas of traditional state responsibility. See [§ Gregory, supra](#), at 460, 111 S.Ct. 2395 (qualifications for state officers); [§ BFP, supra](#), at 544, 114 S.Ct. 1757 (titles to real estate); [§ Solid Waste Agency of Northern Cook Cty. v. Army Corps of Engineers, 531 U.S. 159, 174, 121 S.Ct. 675, 148 L.Ed.2d 576 \(2001\)](#) (land and water use). Perhaps the clearest example of traditional state authority is the punishment of local criminal activity. [§ United States v. Morrison, 529 U.S.](#)

[598, 618, 120 S.Ct. 1740, 146 L.Ed.2d 658 \(2000\)](#). Thus, “we will not be quick to assume that Congress has meant to effect a significant change in the sensitive relation between *859 federal and state criminal jurisdiction.” [Bass, 404 U.S., at 349, 92 S.Ct. 515](#).

In *Bass*, we interpreted a statute that prohibited any convicted felon from “ ‘receiv[ing], possess[ing], or transport[ing] in commerce or affecting commerce ... any firearm.’ ” [Id., at 337, 92 S.Ct. 515](#). The Government argued that the statute barred felons from possessing *all* firearms and that it was not necessary to demonstrate a connection to interstate commerce. We rejected that reading, which would “render[] traditionally local criminal conduct a matter for federal enforcement and would also involve a substantial extension of federal police resources.” [Id., at 350, 92 S.Ct. 515](#). We instead read the statute more narrowly to require proof of a connection to interstate commerce in every case, thereby “preserv[ing] as an element of all the offenses a requirement suited to federal criminal jurisdiction alone.” [Id., at 351, 92 S.Ct. 515](#).

Similarly, in [Jones v. United States, 529 U.S. 848, 850, 120 S.Ct. 1904, 146 L.Ed.2d 902 \(2000\)](#), we confronted the question whether the federal arson statute, which prohibited burning “ ‘any ... property used in interstate or foreign commerce or in any activity affecting interstate or foreign commerce,’ ” reached an owner-occupied private residence. Once again we rejected the Government’s “expansive interpretation,” under which “hardly a building in the land would fall outside the federal statute’s domain.” [Id., at 857, 120 S.Ct. 1904](#). We instead held that the statute was “most sensibly read” more narrowly to reach only buildings used in “active employment for commercial purposes.” [Id., at 855, 120 S.Ct. 1904](#). We noted that “arson is a paradigmatic common-law state crime,” [id., at 858, 120 S.Ct. 1904](#), and that the Government’s proposed broad reading would “ ‘significantly change [] the federal- **2090 state balance,’ ” *ibid.* (quoting [Bass, 404 U.S., at 349, 92 S.Ct. 515](#)), “mak[ing] virtually every arson in the country a federal offense,” [529 U.S., at 859, 120 S.Ct. 1904](#).

These precedents make clear that it is appropriate to refer to basic principles of federalism embodied in the Constitution to resolve ambiguity in a federal statute. In this case, the *860 ambiguity derives from the improbably broad reach of the key statutory definition given the term—“chemical weapon”—being defined; the deeply serious consequences of adopting such a boundless reading; and the lack of any apparent need to do so in light of the context from which the statute arose—a treaty about chemical warfare and terrorism. We conclude that, in this curious case, we can insist on a clear indication that Congress meant to reach purely local crimes, before interpreting the statute’s expansive language in a way that intrudes on the police power of the States. See [Bass, supra, at 349, 92 S.Ct. 515](#).²

[2](#)

Justice SCALIA contends that the relevance of *Bass* and *Jones* to this case is “entirely made up,” *post*, at 2095 (opinion concurring in judgment), but not because he disagrees with interpreting statutes in light of principles of federalism. Rather, he says that *Bass* was a case where the statute was unclear. We agree; we simply think the statute in this case is also subject to construction, for the reasons given. As for *Jones*, Justice SCALIA argues that the discussion of federalism in that case was beside the point. *Post*, at 2095. We do not read *Jones* that way; the Court adopted the “most sensibl[e] read[ing]” of the statute, [529 U.S., at 855, 120 S.Ct. 1904](#), which suggests that other sensible readings were possible. In arriving at its fair reading of the statute, the Court considered the dramatic extent to which the Government’s broader interpretation would have expanded “the federal statute’s domain.” [Id., at 857, 120 S.Ct. 1904](#). We do the same here.

B

We do not find any such clear indication in [section 229](#). “Chemical weapon” is the key term that defines the statute’s reach, and it is defined extremely broadly. But that general definition does not constitute a clear statement that Congress meant the statute to reach local criminal conduct.

In fact, a fair reading of [§ section 229](#) suggests that it does not have as expansive a scope as might at first appear. To begin, as a matter of natural meaning, an educated user of English would not describe Bond's crime as involving a "chemical weapon." Saying that a person "used a chemical weapon" conveys a very different idea than saying the person "used a chemical in a way that caused some harm." The *861 natural meaning of "chemical weapon" takes account of both the particular chemicals that the defendant used and the circumstances in which she used them.

When used in the manner here, the chemicals in this case are not of the sort that an ordinary person would associate with instruments of chemical warfare. The substances that Bond used bear little resemblance to the deadly toxins that are "of particular danger to the objectives of the Convention." Why We Need a Chemical Weapons Convention and an OPCW, in Kenyon & Feakes 17 (describing the Convention's Annex on Chemicals, a nonexhaustive list of covered substances that are subject to special regulation). More to the point, the use of something as a "weapon" typically connotes "[a]n instrument of offensive or defensive combat," Webster's Third New International Dictionary 2589 (2002), or "[a]n instrument of attack or defense in combat, as a gun, missile, or sword," American Heritage Dictionary 2022 (3d ed. 1992). But no speaker in natural parlance would describe Bond's feud-driven act of spreading irritating chemicals on Haynes's door knob and mailbox as "combat." Nor do the other circumstances **2091 of Bond's offense—an act of revenge born of romantic jealousy, meant to cause discomfort, that produced nothing more than a minor thumb burn—suggest that a chemical weapon was deployed in Norristown, Pennsylvania. Potassium dichromate and 10-chloro-10H-phenoxarsine might be chemical weapons if used, say, to poison a city's water supply. But Bond's crime is worlds apart from such hypotheticals, and covering it would give the statute a reach exceeding the ordinary meaning of the words Congress wrote.

In settling on a fair reading of a statute, it is not unusual to consider the ordinary meaning of a defined term, particularly when there is dissonance between that ordinary meaning and the reach of the definition. In [§ Johnson v. United States, 559 U.S. 133, 136, 130 S.Ct. 1265, 176 L.Ed.2d 1 \(2010\)](#), for example, we considered the statutory term " 'violent felony,' " which the Armed Career Criminal *862 Act defined in relevant part as an offense that " 'has as an element the use ... of physical force against the person of another.' " Although "physical force against ... another" might have meant *any* force, however slight, we thought it "clear that in the context of a statutory definition of 'violent felony,' the phrase 'physical force' means *violent* force—that is, force capable of causing physical pain or injury to another person." [§ Id. at 140, 130 S.Ct. 1265](#). The ordinary meaning of "chemical weapon" plays a similar limiting role here.

The Government would have us brush aside the ordinary meaning and adopt a reading of [§ section 229](#) that would sweep in everything from the detergent under the kitchen sink to the stain remover in the laundry room. Yet no one would ordinarily describe those substances as "chemical weapons." The Government responds that because Bond used "specialized, highly toxic" (though legal) chemicals, "this case presents no occasion to address whether Congress intended [[§ section 229](#)] to apply to common household substances." Brief for United States 13, n. 3. That the statute *would* apply so broadly, however, is the inescapable conclusion of the Government's position: Any parent would be guilty of a serious federal offense—possession of a chemical weapon—when, exasperated by the children's repeated failure to clean the goldfish tank, he considers poisoning the fish with a few drops of vinegar. We are reluctant to ignore the ordinary meaning of "chemical weapon" when doing so would transform a statute passed to implement the international Convention on Chemical Weapons into one that also makes it a federal offense to poison goldfish. That would not be a "realistic assessment[] of congressional intent." *Post*, at 2097 (SCALIA, J., concurring in judgment).

In light of all of this, it is fully appropriate to apply the background assumption that Congress normally preserves "the constitutional balance between the National Government and the States." [§ Bond I, 564 U.S., at ----, 131 S.Ct., at 2364](#). That assumption is grounded in the very structure of the Constitution. *863 And as we explained when this case was first before us, maintaining that constitutional balance is not merely an end unto itself. Rather, "[b]y denying any one government complete jurisdiction over all the concerns of public life, federalism protects the liberty of the individual from arbitrary power." *Ibid*.

The Government's reading of [§ section 229](#) would “ ‘alter sensitive federal-state relationships,’ ” convert an astonishing amount of “traditionally local criminal conduct” into “a matter for federal enforcement,” and “involve a substantial extension of federal police resources.” [§ Bass, 404 U.S., at 349–350, 92 S.Ct. 515](#). It would transform the statute from one **2092 whose core concerns are acts of war, assassination, and terrorism into a massive federal anti-poisoning regime that reaches the simplest of assaults. As the Government reads [§ section 229](#), “hardly” a poisoning “in the land would fall outside the federal statute's domain.” [§ Jones, 529 U.S., at 857, 120 S.Ct. 1904](#). Of course Bond's conduct is serious and unacceptable—and against the laws of Pennsylvania. But the background principle that Congress does not normally intrude upon the police power of the States is critically important. In light of that principle, we are reluctant to conclude that Congress meant to punish Bond's crime with a federal prosecution for a chemical weapons attack.

In fact, with the exception of this unusual case, the Federal Government itself has not looked to [§ section 229](#) to reach purely local crimes. The Government has identified only a handful of prosecutions that have been brought under this section. Brief in Opposition 27, n. 5. Most of those involved either terrorist plots or the possession of extremely dangerous substances with the potential to cause severe harm to many people. See [§ United States v. Ghane, 673 F.3d 771 \(C.A.8 2012\)](#) (defendant possessed enough potassium cyanide to kill 450 people); [§ United States v. Crocker, 260 Fed.Appx. 794 \(C.A.6 2008\)](#) (defendant attempted to acquire VX nerve gas and chlorine gas as part of a plot to attack a federal *864 courthouse); [§ United States v. Krar, 134 Fed.Appx. 662 \(C.A.5 2005\)](#) (*per curiam*) (defendant possessed sodium cyanide); [§ United States v. Fries, 2012 WL 689157 \(D.Ariz., Feb. 28, 2012\)](#) (defendant set off a homemade chlorine bomb in the victim's driveway, requiring evacuation of a residential neighborhood). The Federal Government undoubtedly has a substantial interest in enforcing criminal laws against assassination, terrorism, and acts with the potential to cause mass suffering. Those crimes have not traditionally been left predominantly to the States, and nothing we have said here will disrupt the Government's authority to prosecute such offenses.

It is also clear that the laws of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (and every other State) are sufficient to prosecute Bond. Pennsylvania has several statutes that would likely cover her assault. See [§ 18 Pa. Cons.Stat. §§ 2701](#) (2012) (simple assault), 2705 (reckless endangerment), 2709 (harassment).³ And state authorities regularly enforce these laws in poisoning cases. See, *e.g.*, Gamiz, Family Survives Poisoned Burritos, Allentown, Pa., Morning Call, May 18, 2013 (defendant charged with assault, reckless endangerment, and harassment for feeding burritos poisoned with prescription medication to her husband and daughter); Cops: Man Was Poisoned Over 3 Years, Harrisburg, Pa., Patriot News, Aug. 12, 2012, p. A11 (defendant charged with assault and reckless endangerment for poisoning a man with eye drops over three years so that “he would pay more attention to her”).

³ Pennsylvania also prohibits using “a weapon of mass destruction,” including a “chemical agent.” [§ 18 Pa. Cons.Stat. §§ 2716\(a\), \(i\)](#). Just as we conclude that Bond's offense cannot be fairly described as the use of a chemical weapon, Pennsylvania authorities apparently determined that her crime did not involve a “weapon of mass destruction.”

The Government objects that Pennsylvania authorities charged Bond with only a minor offense based on her “harassing telephone calls and letters,” [§ Bond I, 564 U.S., at ———, 131 S.Ct., at 2359](#), and declined to prosecute her for assault. But we have traditionally *865 viewed the exercise of state officials' prosecutorial discretion as a valuable feature of our constitutional system. See [§ **2093 Bordenkircher v. Hayes, 434 U.S. 357, 364, 98 S.Ct. 663, 54 L.Ed.2d 604 \(1978\)](#). And nothing in the Convention shows a clear intent to abrogate that feature. Prosecutorial discretion involves carefully weighing the benefits of a prosecution against the evidence needed to convict, the resources of the public fisc, and the public policy of the State. Here, in its zeal to prosecute Bond, the Federal Government has “displaced” the “public policy of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, enacted in its capacity as sovereign,” that Bond does not belong in prison for a chemical weapons offense. [§ Bond I, supra, at ———, 131 S.Ct., at 2366](#); see also [§ Jones, supra, at 859, 120 S.Ct. 1904](#) (Stevens, J., concurring) (federal prosecution of a traditionally local crime

“illustrates how a criminal law like this may effectively displace a policy choice made by the State”).

As we have explained, “Congress has traditionally been reluctant to define as a federal crime conduct readily denounced as criminal by the States.” [Bass, 404 U.S., at 349, 92 S.Ct. 515.](#) There is no clear indication of a contrary approach here. [Section 229](#) implements the Convention, but Bond's crime could hardly be more unlike the uses of mustard gas on the Western Front or nerve agents in the Iran–Iraq war that form the core concerns of that treaty. See Kenyon & Feakes 6. There are no life-sized paintings of Bond's rival washing her thumb. And there are no apparent interests of the United States Congress or the community of nations in seeing Bond end up in federal prison, rather than dealt with (like virtually all other criminals in Pennsylvania) by the State. The Solicitor General acknowledged as much at oral argument. See Tr. of Oral Arg. 47 (“I don't think anybody would say [that] whether or not Ms. Bond is prosecuted would give rise to an international incident”).

This case is unusual, and our analysis is appropriately limited. Our disagreement with our colleagues reduces to whether [section 229](#) is “utterly clear.” *Post*, at 2094 (SCALIA, *866 J., concurring in judgment). We think it is not, given that the definition of “chemical weapon” in a particular case can reach beyond any normal notion of such a weapon, that the context from which the statute arose demonstrates a much more limited prohibition was intended, and that the most sweeping reading of the statute would fundamentally upset the Constitution's balance between national and local power. This exceptional convergence of factors gives us serious reason to doubt the Government's expansive reading of [section 229](#), and calls for us to interpret the statute more narrowly.

In sum, the global need to prevent chemical warfare does not require the Federal Government to reach into the kitchen cupboard, or to treat a local assault with a chemical irritant as the deployment of a chemical weapon. There is no reason to suppose that Congress—in implementing the Convention on Chemical Weapons—thought otherwise.

* * *

The Convention provides for implementation by each ratifying nation “in accordance with its constitutional processes.” Art. VII(1), 1974 U.N.T.S. 331. As James Madison explained, the constitutional process in our “compound republic” keeps power “divided between two distinct governments.” *The Federalist* No. 51, p. 323 (C. Rossiter ed. 1961). If [section 229](#) reached Bond's conduct, it would mark a dramatic departure from that constitutional structure and a serious reallocation of criminal law enforcement authority between the Federal Government and the States. Absent a clear statement of that purpose, we will not presume Congress to **2094 have authorized such a stark intrusion into traditional state authority.

The judgment of the Court of Appeals is reversed, and the case is remanded for further proceedings consistent with this opinion.

It is so ordered.

Justice SCALIA, with whom Justice THOMAS joins, and with whom Justice ALITO joins as to Part I, concurring in the judgment.

*867 Somewhere in Norristown, Pennsylvania, a husband's paramour suffered a minor thumb burn at the hands of a betrayed wife. The United States Congress—“every where extending the sphere of its activity, and drawing all power into its impetuous vortex”¹—has made a federal case out of it. What are we to do?

The *Federalist* No. 48, p. 333 (J. Cooke ed. 1961) (J. Madison) (hereinafter *The Federalist*).

¹

It is the responsibility of “the legislature, not the Court, ... to define a crime, and ordain its punishment.” [United States v. Wiltberger](#), 5 Wheat. 76, 95, 5 L.Ed. 37 (1820) (Marshall, C.J., for the Court). And it is “emphatically the province and duty of the judicial department to say what the law [including the Constitution] is.” [Marbury v. Madison](#), 1 Cranch 137, 177, 2 L.Ed. 60 (1803) (same). Today, the Court shirks its job and performs Congress's. As sweeping and unsettling as the Chemical Weapons Convention Implementation Act of 1998 may be, it is clear beyond doubt that it covers what Bond did; and we have no authority to amend it. So we are forced to decide—there is no way around it—whether the Act's application to what Bond did was constitutional.

I would hold that it was not, and for that reason would reverse the judgment of the Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit.

I. The Statutory Question

A. Unavoidable Meaning of the Text

The meaning of the Act is plain. No person may knowingly “develop, produce, otherwise acquire, transfer directly or indirectly, receive, stockpile, retain, own, possess, or use, or threaten to use, any chemical weapon.” [18 U.S.C. § 229\(a\)\(1\)](#). A “chemical weapon” is “[a] toxic chemical and *868 its precursors, except where intended for a purpose not prohibited under this chapter as long as the type and quantity is consistent with such a purpose.” § 229F(1)(A). A “toxic chemical” is “any chemical which through its chemical action on life processes can cause death, temporary incapacitation or permanent harm to humans or animals. The term includes all such chemicals, regardless of their origin or of their method of production, and regardless of whether they are produced in facilities, in munitions or elsewhere.” § 229F(8)(A). A “purpose not prohibited” is “[a]ny peaceful purpose related to an industrial, agricultural, research, medical, or pharmaceutical activity or other activity.” § 229F(7)(A).

Applying those provisions to this case is hardly complicated. Bond possessed and used “chemical[s] which through [their] chemical action on life processes can cause death, temporary incapacitation or permanent harm.” Thus, she possessed “toxic chemicals.” And, because they were not possessed or used only for a “purpose not prohibited,” § 229F(1)(A), they were “chemical weapons.” Ergo, Bond violated the Act. End of statutory analysis, I would have thought.²

² Petitioner offers one textual argument that the Court does not consider. She argues that the exception for “peaceful purposes” is best understood as a term of art meaning roughly any purpose that is not “warlike.” Brief for Petitioner 50–57. Though that reading is more defensible than the Court's, the Act will not bear it. If “peaceful” meant “nonwarlike,” the statute's exception for “any individual self-defense device, including ... pepper spray or chemical mace,” § 229C—the prosaic uses of which are surely nonwarlike—would have been unnecessary.

**2095 The Court does not think the interpretive exercise so simple. But that is only because its result-driven antitextualism befogs what is evident.

B. The Court's Interpretation

The Court's account of the clear-statement rule reads like a really good lawyer's brief for the wrong side, relying on cases that are *so close* to being on point that someone eager to reach the favored outcome might swallow them. The relevance *869 to this case of [United States v. Bass](#), 404 U.S. 336, 92 S.Ct. 515, 30 L.Ed.2d 488 (1971), and [Jones v. United States](#), 529 U.S. 848, 120 S.Ct. 1904, 146 L.Ed.2d 902 (2000), is, in truth, entirely made up. In *Bass*, we had to decide whether a statute forbidding “‘receiv [ing], possess [ing], or transport[ing] in commerce or affecting commerce ... any firearm’ ” prohibited possessing a gun that lacked any connection to interstate commerce. 404 U.S., at 337–339, 92 S.Ct. 515. Though the Court relied in part on a federalism-inspired interpretive presumption, it did so only *after* it had found, in Part I of the opinion, applying traditional interpretive tools, that the text in question was ambiguous, *id.*, at 339–347, 92 S.Ct. 515. Adopting in Part II the narrower of the two possible readings, we said that

“*unless Congress conveys its purpose clearly*, it will not be deemed to have significantly changed the federal-state balance.” *Id.*, at 349, 92 S.Ct. 515 (emphasis added). Had Congress “convey[ed] its purpose clearly” by enacting a clear and even sweeping statute, the presumption would not have applied.

Jones is also irrelevant. To determine whether an owner-occupied private residence counted as a “‘property used in interstate or foreign commerce or in any activity affecting interstate or foreign commerce’” under the federal arson statute, 529 U.S., at 850–851, 120 S.Ct. 1904, our opinion examined *not* the federal-jurisdiction-expanding consequences of answering yes but rather the ordinary meaning of the words—and answered no, *id.*, at 855–857, 120 S.Ct. 1904. Then, in a separate part of the opinion, we observed that our reading was consistent with the principle that we should adopt a construction that avoids “grave and doubtful constitutional questions,” *id.*, at 857, 120 S.Ct. 1904, and, quoting *Bass*, the principle that Congress must convey its purpose clearly before its laws will be “‘deemed to have significantly changed the federal-state balance,’” 529 U.S., at 858, 120 S.Ct. 1904. To say that the best reading of the text conformed to those principles is not to say that those principles can render clear text ambiguous.³

³ Other cases in the *Bass* line confirm that broad text “need only be plain to anyone reading [it]” in order to be given its obvious meaning. *Salinas v. United States*, 522 U.S. 52, 60, 118 S.Ct. 469, 139 L.Ed.2d 352 (1997) (internal quotation marks omitted); see also *Pennsylvania Dept. of Corrections v. Yeskey*, 524 U.S. 206, 209, 118 S.Ct. 1952, 141 L.Ed.2d 215 (1998); cf. *United States v. Lopez*, 514 U.S. 549, 562, 115 S.Ct. 1624, 131 L.Ed.2d 626 (1995).

*870 The latter is what the Court says today. Inverting *Bass* and *Jones*, it *starts* with the federalism-related consequences of the statute’s meaning and reasons backwards, holding that, if the statute has what the Court considers a disruptive effect on the “federal-state balance” of criminal jurisdiction, *ante*, at 2089, that effect causes the text, even if clear on its face, to be ambiguous. **2096 Just ponder what the Court says: “[The Act’s] ambiguity *derives* from the improbably broad reach of the key statutory definition ... the deeply serious consequences of adopting such a boundless reading; and the lack of any apparent need to do so...” *Ibid.* (emphasis added). Imagine what future courts can do with that judge-empowering principle: Whatever has improbably broad, deeply serious, and apparently unnecessary consequences ... *is ambiguous!*

The same skillful use of oh-so-close-to-relevant cases characterizes the Court’s *pro forma* attempt to find ambiguity in the text itself, specifically, in the term “[c]hemical weapon.” The ordinary meaning of weapon, the Court says, is an instrument of combat, and “no speaker in natural parlance would describe Bond’s feud-driven act of spreading irritating chemicals on Haynes’s door knob and mailbox as ‘combat.’” *Ante*, at 2090. Undoubtedly so, but undoubtedly beside the point, since the Act supplies its own definition of “chemical weapon,” which unquestionably does bring Bond’s action within the statutory prohibition. The Court retorts that “it is not unusual to consider the ordinary meaning of a defined term, particularly when there is dissonance between that ordinary meaning and the reach of the definition.” *Ante*, at 2091. *So close* to true! What is “not unusual” is using the ordinary meaning of the term being defined for the purpose of resolving *an ambiguity in the definition*. When, for example, “draft,” a word of many meanings, is one of the words used in a definition of “breeze,” we know it has nothing to do with *871 military conscription or beer. The point is illustrated by the almost-relevant case the Court cites for its novel principle, *Johnson v. United States*, 559 U.S. 133, 130 S.Ct. 1265, 176 L.Ed.2d 1 (2010). There the defined term was “violent felony,” which the Act defined as an offense that “has as an element the use ... of physical force against the person of another.” *Id.*, at 135, 130 S.Ct. 1265 (quoting § 924(e)(2)(B)(i)). We had to figure out what “physical force” meant, since the statute “*d[id] not define*” it. *Id.*, at 138, 130 S.Ct. 1265 (emphasis added). So we consulted (among other things) the general meaning of the term being defined, “violent felony.” *Id.*, at 140, 130 S.Ct. 1265.

In this case, by contrast, the ordinary meaning of the term being defined is irrelevant, because the statute’s own definition—however expansive—is utterly clear: any “chemical which through its chemical action on life processes can cause death, temporary incapacitation or permanent harm to humans or animals,” § 229F(8)(A), unless the chemical is possessed or used for a

“peaceful purpose,” § 229F(1)(A), (7)(A). The statute parses itself. There is no opinion of ours, and none written by any court or put forward by any commentator since Aristotle, which says, or even suggests, that “dissonance” between ordinary meaning and the unambiguous words of a definition is to be resolved in favor of ordinary meaning. If that were the case, there would hardly be any use in providing a definition. No, the true rule is entirely clear: “When a statute includes an explicit definition, we must follow that definition, *even if it varies from that term’s ordinary meaning.*” [*Stenberg v. Carhart*, 530 U.S. 914, 942, 120 S.Ct. 2597, 147 L.Ed.2d 743 \(2000\)](#) (emphasis added). Once again, contemplate the judge-empowering consequences of the new interpretive rule the Court today announces: When there is “dissonance” between the statutory definition and the ordinary meaning of the defined word, the latter may prevail.

But even text clear on its face, the Court suggests, must be read against the backdrop of established interpretive presumptions. Thus, we presume “that a criminal **2097 statute *872 derived from the common law carries with it the requirement of a culpable mental state—even if no such limitation appears in the text.” *Ante*, at 2088. And we presume that “federal statutes do not apply outside the United States.” *Ibid*. Both of those are, indeed, established interpretive presumptions that are (1) based upon realistic assessments of congressional intent, and (2) well known to Congress—thus furthering rather than subverting genuine legislative intent. To apply these presumptions, then, is not to rewrite clear text; it is to interpret words fairly, in light of their statutory context. But there is nothing either (1) realistic or (2) well known about the presumption the Court shoves down the throat of a resisting statute today. Who in the world would have thought that a definition is inoperative if it contradicts ordinary meaning? When this statute was enacted, there was not yet a “*Bond* presumption” to that effect—though presumably Congress will have to take account of the *Bond* presumption in the future, perhaps by adding at the end of all its definitions that depart from ordinary connotation “and we really mean it.”

C. The Statute as Judicially Amended

I suspect the Act will not survive today’s gruesome surgery. A criminal statute must clearly define the conduct it proscribes. If it does not “give a person of ordinary intelligence fair notice” of its scope, [*United States v. Batchelder*, 442 U.S. 114, 123, 99 S.Ct. 2198, 60 L.Ed.2d 755 \(1979\)](#), it denies due process.

The new § 229(a)(1) fails that test. Henceforward, a person “shall be fined ..., imprisoned for any term of years, or both,” § 229A(a)(1)—or, if he kills someone, “shall be punished by death or imprisoned for life,” § 229A(a)(2)—whenever he “develop[s], produce[s], otherwise acquire[s], transfer [s] directly or indirectly, receive[s], stockpile[s], retain[s], own [s], possess[es], or use[s], or threaten[s] to use,” § 229(a)(1), any chemical “of the sort that an ordinary person would associate with instruments of chemical warfare,” *873 *ante*, at 2090 (emphasis added). Whether that test is satisfied, the Court unhelpfully (and also illogically) explains, depends not only on the “particular chemicals that the defendant used” but also on “the circumstances in which she used them.” *Ibid*. The “detergent under the kitchen sink” and “the stain remover in the laundry room” are apparently out, *ante*, at 2091—but what if they are deployed to poison a neighborhood water fountain? Poisoning a goldfish tank is also apparently out, *ante*, at 2091, but what if the fish belongs to a Congressman or Governor and the act is meant as a menacing message, a small-time equivalent of leaving a severed horse head in the bed? See *ibid*. (using the “concerns” driving the Convention—“acts of war, assassination, and terrorism”—as guideposts of statutory meaning). Moreover, the Court’s illogical embellishment seems to apply only to the “use” of a chemical, *ante*, at 2090, but “use” is only 1 of 11 kinds of activity that the statute prohibits. What, one wonders, makes something a “chemical weapon” when it is merely “stockpile[d]” or “possess[ed]?” To these questions and countless others, one guess is as bad as another.

No one should have to ponder the totality of the circumstances in order to determine whether his conduct is a felony. Yet that is what the Court will now require of all future handlers of harmful toxins—that is to say, all of us. Thanks to the Court’s revisions, the Act, which before was merely broad, is now broad and unintelligible. “[N]o standard of conduct is specified at all.” [*Coates v. Cincinnati*, 402 U.S. 611, 614, 91 S.Ct. 1686, 29 L.Ed.2d 214 \(1971\)](#). Before long, I suspect, courts will be required to say so.

**2098 II. The Constitutional Question

[Omitted]

Justice [THOMAS](#), with whom Justice [SCALIA](#) joins, and with whom Justice [ALITO](#) joins as to Parts I, II, and III, concurring in the judgment.

[Omitted]

Justice [ALITO](#), concurring in the judgment.

[Omitted]

Supreme Court of the United States

LEO SHEEP COMPANY et al., Petitioners,

v.

UNITED STATES et al.

77-1686.

Argued Jan. 15, 16, 1979.

Decided March 27, 1979.

Mr. Justice REHNQUIST delivered the opinion of the Court.

This is one of those rare cases evoking episodes in this country's history that, if not forgotten, are remembered as dry facts and not as adventure. Admittedly the issue is mundane: Whether the Government has an implied easement to build a road across land that was originally granted to the Union Pacific Railroad under the Union Pacific Act of 1862—a grant that was part of a governmental scheme to subsidize the construction of the transcontinental railroad. But that issue is posed against the backdrop of a fascinating chapter in our history. As this Court noted in another case involving ^{**1405} the Union Pacific Railroad, “courts, in construing a statute, may with propriety recur to the history of the times when it was passed; and this is frequently necessary, in order to ascertain the reason as well as the meaning of particular provisions in it.” [*United States v. Union Pacific R. Co.*, 91 U.S. 72, 79, 23 L.Ed. 224 \(1875\)](#). In this spirit we relate the events underlying passage of the Union Pacific Act of 1862.

*670 I

The early 19th century—from the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 to the Gadsden Purchase in 1853—saw the acquisition of the territory we now regard as the American West.¹ During those years, however, the area remained a largely untapped resource, for the settlers on the eastern seaboard of the United States did not keep pace with the rapidly expanding western frontier. A vaguely delineated area forbiddingly referred to as the “Great American Desert” can be found on more than one map published before 1850, embracing much of the United States' territory west of the Missouri River. As late as 1860, for example, the entire population of the State of Nebraska was less than 30,000 persons, which represented one person for every five square miles of land area within the State.

¹ Except as otherwise noted, this historical discussion draws on C. Ames, *Pioneering the Union Pacific* (1969); R. Athearn, *Union Pacific Country* (1971); R. Howard, *The Great Iron Trail* (1962); J. McMaster, *A History of the People of the United States During Lincoln's Administration* (1927); 2 A. Nevins, *Ordeal of the Union* (1947); H. White, *History of the Union Pacific Railway* (1895).

With the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in California in 1848, the California gold rush began and with it a sharp increase in settlement of the West. Those in the East with visions of instant wealth, however, confronted the unenviable choice among an arduous 4-month overland trek, risking yellow fever on a 35-day voyage via the Isthmus of Panama, and a better than 4-month voyage around Cape Horn. They obviously yearned for another alternative, and interest focused on the transcontinental railroad.

The idea of a transcontinental railroad predated the California gold rush. From the time that Asa Whitney had proposed a relatively practical plan for its construction in 1844, it had, in the words of one of this century's leading historians of the era, “engaged the eager attention of promoters and politicians ^{*671} until dozens of schemes were in the air.”² The building of the railroad was not to be the unalloyed product of the free-enterprise system. There was indeed the inspiration of men like Thomas Durant and Leland Stanford and the perspiration of a generation of immigrants,

but animating it all was the desire of the Federal Government that the West be settled. This desire was intensified by the need to provide a logistical link with California in the heat of the Civil War. That the venture was much too risky and much too expensive for private capital alone was evident in the years of fruitless exhortation; private investors would not move without tangible governmental inducement.³

² 2 Nevins, *supra* n. 1, at 82.

³ That exhortation came from some of the great visionaries of the 19th century. On the floor of the House, Thomas Hart Benton compared eastern Kansas to Egypt and extolled the wealth that would be shared by a private railroad to California. Athearn, *supra* n. 1, at 22–23. Senator William H. Seward of New York, a man not known for his timidity, proclaimed “that a railroad is necessary, and ought to be built; and I think it has been scientifically demonstrated . . . that not only one such road is feasible, but that at least three, four, or five routes offer the necessary facilities for the security of this great object.” Cong. Globe, 35th Cong., 1st Sess., 1584 (1858). In his book *An Overland Journey*, Horace Greeley was equally enthusiastic. He went so far as to calculate the economic feasibility of the proposed railroad line by estimating potential revenue, based on the value of current shipments of gold from California, passenger fares that could be obtained, and the cost to the Government of transporting and maintaining an army in the West and providing mail services. H. Greeley, *An Overland Journey* 310–316 (C. Duncan ed. 1964). But despite his enthusiasm Greeley appreciated that the effort was beyond private capital alone. “The amount is too vast; the enterprise too formidable; the returns too remote and uncertain.” “[W]hat assurance could an association of private citizens have that, having devoted their means and energies to the construction of such a road, it would not be rivaled and destroyed by a similar work on some other route?” *Id.*, at 324.

**1406 In the mid-19th century there was serious disagreement as to the forms that inducement could take. Mr. Justice Story, in his *Commentaries on the Constitution*, described one extant school of thought which argued that “internal improvements,” such as railroads, were not within the enumerated constitutional powers of Congress.⁴ Under such a theory, the direct subsidy of a transcontinental railroad was constitutionally suspect—an uneasiness aggravated by President Andrew Jackson's 1830 veto of a bill appropriating funds to construct a road from Maysville to Lexington within the State of Kentucky.⁵

⁴ 2 J. Story, *Commentaries on the Constitution* 166–172 (5th ed. 1891). See Cong. Globe, 35th Cong., 2d Sess., 579–585 (1859) (Sen. Andrew Johnson).

⁵ 2 J. Richardson, *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents 1789–1897*, pp. 483–493 (1896).

The response to this constitutional “gray” area, and source of political controversy, was the “checkerboard” land-grant scheme. The Union Pacific Act of 1862 granted public land to the Union Pacific Railroad for each mile of track that it laid.⁶ Land surrounding the railway right-of-way was divided into “checkerboard” blocks. Odd-numbered lots were granted to the Union Pacific; even-numbered lots were reserved by the Government. As a result, Union Pacific land in the area of the right-of-way was usually surrounded by public land, and vice versa. The historical explanation for this peculiar disposition is that it was apparently an attempt to disarm the “internal improvement” opponents by establishing a grant scheme with “demonstrable” benefits. As one historian notes in describing an 1827 federal land grant intended to facilitate private construction of a road between Columbus and Sandusky, Ohio:

⁶ Act of July 1, 1862, 12 Stat. 489.

“Though awkwardly stated, and not fully developed in the Act of 1827, this was the beginning of a practice to be followed in most future instances of granting land for the construction of specific internal improvements: donating alternate sections or one half of the land within a strip along the line of the project and reserving the other half for sale. . . . In later donations the price of the reserved sections was doubled so that it could be argued, as the *Congressional Globe* shows *ad infinitum*, that by giving half the land away and thereby making possible construction of the road, canal, or railroad, the government would recover from the reserved sections as much as it would have received from the whole.” P. Gates, *History of Public Land Law Development* 345–346 (1968).⁷

7 Government grants to aid the development of transportation facilities gained momentum during the administration of John Quincy Adams, who did not share Madison's and Monroe's reservations about the constitutionality of the Government's involvement in such activities. Checkerboard land grants achieved currency during the canal era. Apparently the first such grant was to aid construction of the Wabash and Erie Canal in Indiana. See P. Gates, *History of Public Land Law Development* 341–356 (1968).

In 1850 this technique was first explicitly employed for the subsidization of a railroad when the Illinois delegation in Congress, which included Stephen A. Douglas, secured the enactment of a bill that granted public lands to aid the construction of the Illinois Central Railroad.⁸ The Illinois Central and proposed connecting lines to the south were granted nearly three million acres along rights of way through Illinois, Mississippi, and Alabama, and by the end of 1854 the **1407 main line of the Illinois Central from Chicago to Cairo, Ill., had been put into operation. Before this line was constructed, public lands had gone begging at the Government's minimum price; within a few years after its completion, the railroad had disposed of more than one million acres and was rapidly *674 selling more at prices far above those at which land had been originally offered by the Government.

8 Act of Sept. 20, 1850, 9 Stat. 466. This was not, however, the first time land grants were used to subsidize a railroad. In 1833, Congress permitted a grant that had been intended for canal construction to be used instead for the building of a railroad. Gates, *supra* n. 7, at 357.

The “internal improvements” theory was not the only obstacle to a transcontinental railroad. In 1853 Congress had appropriated moneys and authorized Secretary of War Jefferson Davis to undertake surveys of various proposed routes for a transcontinental railroad. Congress was badly split along sectional lines on the appropriate location of the route—so badly split that Stephen A. Douglas, now a Senator from Illinois, in 1854 suggested the construction of a northern, central, and southern route, each with connecting branches in the East.⁹ That proposal, however, did not break the impasse.

9 Asa Whitney's original proposal had contemplated an eastern terminus on the south shore of Lake Michigan, and a western terminus in northern California or Oregon. Senator Gwin of California, a Southern sympathizer, urged a route running from Memphis through Ft. Smith and Albuquerque to Los Angeles. Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, eschewing both the extreme northern and extreme southern routes, advocated “a great central national highway”—beginning in St. Louis. 2 Nevins, *supra* n. 1, at 82–83.

The necessary impetus was provided by the Civil War. Senators and Representatives from those States which seceded from the Union were no longer present in Congress, and therefore the sectional overtones of the dispute as to routes largely disappeared. Although there were no major engagements during the Civil War in the area between the Missouri River and the west coast which would be covered by any transcontinental railroad, there were two minor engagements which doubtless made some impression upon Congress of the necessity for being able to transport readily men and materials into that area for military purposes.

Accounts of the major engagements of the Civil War do not generally include the Battle of Picacho Pass, because in the words of Edwin Corle, author of *The Gila*, “[i]t could be called nothing more than a minor skirmish today.”¹⁰ It was *675 fought 42 miles northwest of Tucson, Ariz., on April 15, 1862, between a small contingent of Confederate cavalry commanded by Captain Sherod Hunter and Union troops under Colonel James H. Carleton consisting of infantry, cavalry, and artillery components known as the “California Volunteers.” The battle was a draw, with the Union forces losing three men and the badly outnumbered Confederates apparently suffering two men killed and two captured. Following the battle, the Confederate forces abandoned Tucson, which they had previously occupied, and Carleton's Union forces entered that city on May 20, 1862.

10 E. Corle, *The Gila* 232 (1951).

The Battle of Glorieta Pass has similarly endured anonymity. Also described as La Glorieta Pass or Apache Canyon, Glorieta Pass lies in the upper valley of the Pecos River, in the southern foothills of the Sangre de Cristo range of the Rocky Mountains near Sante Fe, N. M. Here in the early spring of 1862 a regiment of Colorado volunteers, having moved by forced marches from Denver to Ft. Union, turned back Confederate forces led by Brigadier General Henry Sibley which,

until this encounter, had marched triumphantly northward up the Rio Grande Valley from Ft. Bliss. As a result of the Battle of Glorieta Pass, New Mexico was saved for the Union, and Sibley's forces fell back in an easterly direction through Texas before the advance of Carleton's column of Californians.¹¹

¹¹ See generally M. Hall, *Sibley's New Mexico Campaign* (1960); W. Whitford, *The Colorado Volunteers in the Civil War* (1971). The Confederate forces in New Mexico have since been lauded for their courage, if not for their optimism. One Southern commander is reported to have responded to a Union demand for surrender: "We will fight first and surrender afterwards!" G. Harris, *A Tale of Men Who Knew Not Fear* 18 (1935).

****1408** These engagements gave some immediacy to the comments of Congressman Edwards of New Hampshire during the debate on the Pacific Railroad bill:

"If this Union is to be preserved, if we are successfully to combat the difficulties around us, if we are to crush out *676 this rebellion against the lawful authority of the Government, and are to have an entire restoration, it becomes us, with statesmanlike prudence and sagacity, to look carefully into the future, and to guard in advance against all possible considerations which may threaten the dismemberment of the country hereafter." *Cong. Globe*, 37th Cong., 2d Sess., 1703 (1862).

As is often the case, war spurs technological development, and Congress enacted the Union Pacific Act in May 1862. Perhaps not coincidentally, the Homestead Act was passed the same month.

The Union Pacific Act specified a route west from the 100th meridian, between a site in the Platte River Valley near the cities of Kearney and North Platte, Neb., to California. The original plan was for five eastern terminals located at various points on or near the Missouri River; but in fact Omaha was the only terminal built according to the plan.¹²

¹² The choice of the 100th meridian as the eastern end of the rail line was not without significance. The 100th meridian has been traditionally thought of as the parallel west of which it was impossible to raise most crops without irrigation. Omaha, for example, 300 miles to the east, receives an average of 25 inches of rainfall per year, while Sidney, Neb., west of the meridian and near the Wyoming line, receives an average of only 16 inches of rainfall each year. Thus, in a sense the 100th meridian represented, not only to travelers but also to potential settlers, the eastern boundary of the amorphous "Great American Desert."
"In general, historians have been content to postulate that American institutions, orientations, and habits of thought which developed east of the 100th meridian maintained their form and retained their content after reaching the West, whereas in fact a good many important ones did not. In the second place, historians have generally been ignorant of or incurious about natural conditions that determine life in the West, differentiate it from other sections, and have given it different orientations." Introduction of Bernard DeVoto to W. Stegner, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* xviii-xix (1954).

The land grants made by the Union Pacific Act included all *677 the odd-numbered lots within 10 miles on either side of the track. When the Union Pacific's original subscription drive for private investment proved a failure, the land grant was doubled by extending the checkerboard grants to 20 miles on either side of the track. Private investment was still sluggish, and construction did not begin until July 1865, three months after the cessation of Civil War hostilities.¹³ Thus began a race with the Central Pacific Railroad, which was laying track eastward from Sacramento, for the Government land ****1409** grants which went with each mile of track laid. The race culminated in the driving of the golden spike at Promontory, Utah, on May 10, 1869.

¹³ Construction would not have begun then without the *Crédit Mobilier*, a limited-liability company that was essentially owned by the promoters and investors of the Union Pacific. One of these investors, Oakes Ames, a wealthy New England shovel maker, was a substantial investor in *Crédit Mobilier* and also a Member of Congress. *Crédit Mobilier* contracted with the Union Pacific to build portions of the road, and by 1866 several individuals were large investors in both corporations. Allegations of improper use of funds and bribery of Members of the House of Representatives led to the appointment of a special congressional investigatory committee that during 1872 and 1873 looked into the affairs of *Crédit Mobilier*. These investigations revealed improprieties on the part of more than one Member of Congress, and the committee recommended that Ames be expelled from Congress. The investigation also touched on the career of a future President. See M. Leech & H. Brown, *The Garfield Orbit* (1978).
In 1872 the House of Representatives enacted a resolution condemning the policy of granting subsidies of public lands to railroads. *Cong. Globe*, 42d Cong., 2d Sess., 1585 (1872); see [Great Northern R. Co. v. United States, 315 U.S. 262, 273-274, 62 S.Ct. 529, 533-534, 86 L.Ed. 836 \(1942\)](#). Of course, the reaction of the public or of Congress a decade after the enactment of the Union Pacific Act to the conduct of those associated with the Union Pacific cannot influence our interpretation of that Act today.

II

This case is the modern legacy of these early grants. Petitioners, the Leo Sheep Co. and the Palm Livestock Co., are the Union Pacific Railroad's successors in fee to specific odd-numbered *678 sections of land in Carbon County, Wyo. These sections lie to the east and south of the Seminole Reservoir, an area that is used by the public for fishing and hunting. Because of the checkerboard configuration, it is physically impossible to enter the Seminole Reservoir sector from this direction without some minimum physical intrusion upon private land. In the years immediately preceding this litigation, the Government had received complaints that private owners were denying access over their lands to the reservoir area or requiring the payment of access fees. After negotiation with these owners failed, the Government cleared a dirt road extending from a local county road to the reservoir across both public domain lands and fee lands of the Leo Sheep Co. It also erected signs inviting the public to use the road as a route to the reservoir.

Petitioners initiated this action pursuant to [28 U.S.C. § 2409a](#) to quiet title against the United States. The District Court granted petitioners' motion for summary judgment, but was reversed on appeal by the Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit. [570 F.2d 881](#). The latter court concluded that when Congress granted land to the Union Pacific Railroad, it implicitly reserved an easement to pass over the odd-numbered sections in order to reach the even-numbered sections that were held by the Government. Because this holding affects property rights in 150 million acres of land in the Western United States, we granted certiorari, [439 U.S. 817, 99 S.Ct. 78, 58 L.Ed.2d 108](#), and now reverse.

The Government does not claim that there is any express reservation of an easement in the Union Pacific Act that would authorize the construction of a public road on the Leo Sheep Co.'s property. Section 3 of the 1862 Act sets out a few specific reservations to the "checkerboard" grant. The grant was not to include land "sold, reserved, or otherwise disposed of by the United States," such as land to which there were homestead claims. 12 Stat. 492. Mineral lands were also excepted from the operation of the Act. *Ibid.* *679 Given the existence of such explicit exceptions, this Court has in the past refused to add to this list by divining some "implicit" congressional intent. In [Missouri, K. & T. R. Co. v. Kansas Pacific R. Co., 97 U.S. 491, 497, 24 L.Ed. 1095 \(1878\)](#), for example, this Court in an opinion by Mr. Justice Field noted that the intent of Congress in making the Union Pacific grants was clear: "It was to aid in the construction of the road by a gift of lands along its route, without reservation of rights, except such as were specifically mentioned . . ." The Court held that, although a railroad right-of-way under the grant may not have been located until years after 1862, by the clear terms of the Act only claims established prior to 1862 overrode the railroad grant; conflicting claims arising after that time could not be given effect. To overcome the lack of support in the Act itself, the Government here argues that the implicit reservation of the asserted easement is established by "settled rules of property law" and by the Unlawful Inclosures of Public Lands Act of 1885.

Where a private landowner conveys to another individual a portion of his lands in a certain area and retains the rest, it is presumed at common law that the grantor has reserved an easement to pass over the granted property if such passage is necessary to reach the retained property. These rights-of-way are referred to as "easements by necessity."¹⁴ There are two problems **1410 with the Government's reliance on that notion in this case. First of all, whatever right of passage a private landowner might have, it is not at all clear that it would include the right to construct a road for public access to a recreational area.¹⁵ More importantly, the easement is not *680 actually a matter of necessity in this case because the Government has the power of eminent domain. Jurisdictions have generally seen eminent domain and easements by necessity as alternative ways to effect the same result. For example, the State of Wyoming no longer recognizes the common-law easement by necessity in cases involving landlocked estates. It provides instead for a procedure whereby the landlocked owner can have an access route condemned on his behalf upon payment of the necessary compensation to the owner of the servient estate.¹⁶ For similar reasons other state courts have held that the "easement by necessity" doctrine is not available to the sovereign.¹⁷

- [14](#) See generally 3 R. Powell, Real Property ¶ 410 (1978). For a recent discussion and application of the “easement by necessity” doctrine, see [Hollywyle Assn., Inc. v. Hollister](#), 164 Conn. 389, 324 A.2d 247 (1973).
- [15](#) It is very unlikely that Congress in 1862 contemplated this type of intrusion, and it could not reasonably be maintained that failure to provide access to the public at large would render the Seminole Reservoir land useless. Yet these are precisely the considerations that define the scope of easements by necessity. As one commentator relied on by the Government notes:
 “As the name implies, these easements are the product of situations where the usefulness of land is at stake. The scope of the resultant easement embodies the best judgment of the court as to what is reasonably essential to the land’s use. . . . Changes in the dominant parcel’s use exert some, but not a great influence, in determining the scope of such easements.” 3 Powell, *supra* n. 14, ¶ 416, pp. 34–203 to 34–204 (footnotes omitted). See, e.g., [Higbee Fishing Club v. Atlantic City Electric Co.](#), 78 N.J.Eq. 434, 79 A. 326 (1911) (footpath, not roadway, proper scope of easement where use of dominant estate as clubhouse could not have been contemplated by parties to original grant).
- [16](#) [Wyo.Stat. §§ 24–9–101 to 24–9–104 \(1977\)](#); see [Snell v. Ruppert](#), 541 P.2d 1042, 1046 (Wyo.1975) (statute “offers complete relief to the shut-in landowner and covers the whole subject matter”; “[i]f a statute covers a whole subject matter, the abrogation of the common law on the same subject will necessarily be implied”). See also, e.g., [Quinn v. Holly](#), 244 Miss. 808, 146 So.2d 357 (1962). In light of the history of public land grants related in Part I of this opinion, it is not surprising that “private” eminent domain statutes like that of Wyoming are most prevalent in the Western United States.
- [17](#) [E.g., State v. Black Bros.](#), 116 Tex. 615, 629–630, 297 S.W. 213, 218–219 (1927); see [Pearne v. Coal Creek Min. & Mfg. Co.](#), 90 Tenn. 619, 627–628, 18 S.W. 402, 404 (1891).

The applicability of the doctrine of easement by necessity in this case is, therefore, somewhat strained, and ultimately of *681 little significance. The pertinent inquiry in this case is the intent of Congress when it granted land to the Union Pacific in 1862. The 1862 Act specifically listed reservations to the grant, and we do not find the tenuous relevance of the common-law doctrine of ways of necessity sufficient to overcome the inference prompted by the omission of any reference to the reserved right asserted by the Government in this case. It is possible that Congress gave the problem of access little thought; but it is at least as likely that the thought which was given focused on negotiation, reciprocity considerations, and the power of eminent domain as obvious devices for ameliorating disputes.¹⁸ **1411 So both as matter of common-law *682 doctrine and as a matter of construing congressional intent, we are unwilling to imply rights-of-way, with the substantial impact that such implication would have on property rights granted over 100 years ago, in the absence of a stronger case for their implication than the Government makes here.

- [18](#) The intimations that can be found in the Congressional Globe are that there was no commonly understood reservation by the Government of the right to enter upon granted lands and construct a public road. Representative Cradlebaugh of Nevada offered an amendment to what became the Union Pacific Act of 1862 that would have reserved the right to the public to enter granted land and prospect for valuable minerals upon the payment of adequate compensation to the owner. The proposed amendment was defeated. The only Representative other than Cradlebaugh who spoke to it, Representative Sargent of California, stated:

“The amendment of the gentleman proposes to allow the public to enter upon the lands of any man, whether they be mineral lands or not, and prospect for gold and silver, and as compensation proposes some loose method of payment for the injuries inflicted. Now, sir, it may turn out that the man who thus commits the injuries may be utterly insolvent, not able to pay a dollar, and how is the owner of the property to be compensated for tearing down his dwellings, rooting up his orchards, and destroying his crops?” Cong. Globe, 37th Cong., 2d Sess., 1910 (1862).

In debates on an earlier Pacific Railroad bill it was explicitly suggested that there be “a reservation in every grant of land that [the Government] shall have a right to go through it, and take it at proper prices to be paid hereafter.” The author of this proposal, Senator Simmons of Rhode Island, lamented the lack of such a reservation in the bill under consideration. Cong. Globe, 35th Cong., 2d Sess., 579 (1859). Apparently the intended purpose of this proposed reservation was to permit railroads to obtain rights-of-way through granted property at the Government’s behest. Senator Simmons’ comments are somewhat confused, but they certainly do not evince any prevailing assumption that the Government implicitly reserved a right-of-way through granted lands.

The Government would have us decide this case on the basis of the familiar canon of construction that, when grants to federal lands are at issue, any doubts “are resolved for the Government not against it.” [Andrus v. Charlestone Stone Products Co.](#), 436 U.S. 604, 617, 98 S.Ct. 2002, 2010, 56 L.Ed.2d 570 (1978). But this Court long ago declined to apply this canon in its full vigor to grants under the railroad Acts. In 1885 this Court observed:

“The solution of [ownership] questions [involving the railroad grants] depends, of course, upon the construction given to the acts making the grants; and they are to receive such a construction as will carry out the intent of Congress, however difficult it might be to give full effect to the language used if the grants were by instruments of private conveyance. To ascertain that intent

we must look to the condition of the country when the acts were passed, as well as to the purpose declared on their face, and read all parts of them together.” [Winona & St. Peter R. Co. v. Barney](#), 113 U.S. 618, 625, 5 S.Ct. 606, 609, 28 L.Ed. 1109 (1885).

The Court harmonized the longstanding rule enunciated most recently in *Andrus, supra*, with the doctrine of *Winona* in [United States v. Denver & Rio Grande R. Co.](#), 150 U.S. 1, 14, 14 S.Ct. 11, 15–16, 37 L.Ed. 975 (1893) when it said:

“It is undoubtedly, as urged by the plaintiffs in error, the well-settled rule of this court that public grants are construed strictly against the grantees, but they are not to be so construed as to defeat the intent of the legislature, *683 or to withhold what is given either expressly or by necessary or fair implication. . . .

“ . . . When an act, operating as a general law, and manifesting clearly the intention of Congress to secure public advantages, or to subserve the public interests and welfare by means of benefits more or less valuable, offers to individuals or to corporations as an inducement to undertake and accomplish great and expensive enterprises or works of a *quasi* public character in or through an immense and undeveloped public domain, such legislation stands upon a somewhat different footing from merely a private grant, and should receive at the hands of the court a more liberal construction in favor of the purposes for which it was enacted.”

Thus, invocation of the canon reiterated in *Andrus* does little to advance the Government's position in this case.

Nor do we find the Unlawful Inclosures of Public Lands Act of 1885 of any significance in this controversy. That Act was a response to the “range wars,” the legendary struggle between cattlemen and farmers during the last half of the 19th century. Cattlemen had entered Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakota Territory before other settlers, and they grazed their herds freely on public lands with the Federal Government's acquiescence.¹⁹ To maintain their dominion **1412 over the ranges, cattlemen used homestead and pre-emption laws to gain control of water sources in the range lands. With monopoly control of such sources, the cattlemen found that ownership over a relatively small area might yield effective control of thousands of acres of grassland. Another exclusionary technique was the illegal fencing of public lands which was often the product of the checkerboard pattern of railroad grants. By placing fences near the borders of their parts of the *684 checkerboard, cattlemen could fence in thousands of acres of public lands. Reports of the Secretary of the Interior indicated that vast areas of public grazing land had been pre-empted by such fencing patterns.²⁰ In response Congress passed the Unlawful Inclosures Act of 1885.²¹

¹⁹ M. Clawson & B. Held, *The Federal Lands* 57–58, 84–85 (1957).

²⁰ H.R.Rep. No. 1325, 48th Cong., 1st Sess. (1884). For example, in a letter to the House of Representatives the Secretary related two instances in Colorado where cattle companies fenced in more than one million acres each. Congressional concern was heightened by the fact that these and other cattle corporations were foreign owned. *Id.*, at 2.

²¹ 23 Stat. 321, as amended, [43 U.S.C. § 1061](#) *et seq.*

Section 1 of the Unlawful Inclosures Act states that “[a]ll inclosures of any public lands . . . constructed by any person . . . to any of which land included within the inclosure the person . . . had no claim or color of title made or acquired in good faith . . . are declared to be unlawful.” 23 Stat. 321, [43 U.S.C. § 1061](#). Section 3 further provides:

“No person, by force, threats, intimidation, or by any fencing or inclosing, or any other unlawful means, shall prevent or obstruct, or shall combine and confederate with others to prevent or obstruct, any person from peaceably entering upon or establishing a settlement or residence on any tract of public land subject to settlement or entry under the public land laws of the United States, or shall prevent or obstruct free passage or transit over or through the public lands: *Provided*, This section shall not be held to affect the right or title of persons, who have gone upon,

improved, or occupied said lands under the land laws of the United States, claiming title thereto, in good faith.” 23 Stat. 322, [43 U.S.C. § 1063](#).

The Government argues that the prohibitions of this Act should somehow be read to include the Leo Sheep Co.'s refusal to acquiesce in a public road over its property, and that such a conclusion is supported by this Court's opinion in *685 [Camfield v. United States](#), 167 U.S. 518, 17 S.Ct. 864, 42 L.Ed. 260 (1897). We find, however, that *Camfield* does not afford the support that the Government seeks. That case involved a fence that was constructed on odd-numbered lots so as to enclose 20,000 acres of public land, thereby appropriating it to the exclusive use of Camfield and his associates. This Court analyzed the fence from the perspective of nuisance law, and concluded that the Unlawful Inclosures Act was an appropriate exercise of the police power.

There is nothing, however, in the *Camfield* opinion to suggest that the Government has the authority asserted here. In fact, the Court affirmed the grantee's right to fence completely his own land.

“So long as the individual proprietor confines his enclosure to his own land, the Government has no right to complain, since he is entitled to the complete and exclusive enjoyment of it, regardless of any detriment to his neighbor; but when, under the guise of enclosing his own land, he builds a fence which is useless for that purpose, and can only have been intended to enclose the lands of the Government, he is plainly within the statute, and is guilty of an unwarrantable appropriation of that which belongs to the public at large.” [Id.](#), at 528, 17 S.Ct., at 868.

Obviously, if odd-numbered lots are individually fenced, the access to even-numbered lots is obstructed. Yet the *Camfield* Court found that this was not a violation of the Unlawful Inclosures Act. In that light we cannot see how the Leo Sheep Co.'s unwillingness to entertain a public road without compensation can be a violation of that Act. It is certainly true that the problem we **1413 confront today was not a matter of great concern during the time the 1862 railroad grants were made. The order of the day was the open range—barbed wire had not made its presence felt—and the type of incursions on *686 private property necessary to reach public land was not such an interference that litigation would serve any motive other than spite.²² Congress obviously believed that when development came, it would occur in a parallel fashion on adjoining public and private lands and that the process of subdivision, organization of a polity, and the ordinary pressures of commercial and social intercourse would work itself into a pattern of access roads.²³ The *Camfield* case expresses similar sentiments. After the passage quoted above conceding the authority of a private landowner to fence the entire perimeter of his odd-numbered lot, the Court opined that such authority was of little practical significance “since a separate enclosure of each section would only become desirable when the country had been settled, and roads had been built which would give access to each section.” *Ibid.* It is some testament to common sense that the present case is virtually unprecedented, *687 and that in the 117 years since the grants were made, litigation over access questions generally has been rare.

²² There were exceptions, one of which, [Buford v. Houtz](#), 133 U.S. 320, 10 S.Ct. 305, 33 L.Ed. 618 (1890), reached this Court. See n. 24, *infra*.

²³ This expectation was fostered by the general land-grant scheme. Each block in the checkerboard was a square mile—640 acres. The public lots were open to homesteading, with 160 acres the maximum allowable claim under the Homestead Act. Act of May 20, 1862, 12 Stat. 392. The Union Pacific was required by the 1862 Act to sell or otherwise dispose of the land granted to it within three years after completion of the entire road, with lands not so disposed of within that period subject to homesteading and pre-emption. Thus, in 1862, the process of subdivision was perceived, to a great degree, as inevitable.

During the 1850 debates concerning the Illinois Central Railroad, Senator Cass of Michigan outlined the dynamics that were presumed to underlie the system of checkerboard grants: “In all the new portions of the United States this Government owns a large proportion of the property. They sell it. They offer it for sale. It is surveyed, thrown into market, and emigration is invited. Tract after tract is sold, roads are made, villages and towns are built up, and all the improvements that can be of value to a country go on and increase the value of the lands” Cong. Globe, 31st Cong., 1st Sess. 846 (1850).

Nonetheless, the present times are litigious ones and the 37th Congress did not anticipate our plight. Generations of land patents have issued without any express reservation of the right now claimed by the Government. Nor has a similar right been asserted before.²⁴ When the Secretary

of the Interior has discussed access rights, his discussion has been colored by the assumption that those rights had to be purchased.²⁵ This Court has traditionally recognized the special need for certainty and predictability where land titles are concerned, and we are **1414 unwilling to upset settled expectations to accommodate some ill-defined power to construct public *688 thoroughfares without compensation.²⁶ The judgment of the Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit is accordingly

24 This distinguishes the instant case from *Buford v. Houtz*, *supra*. The appellants there were a group of cattle ranchers seeking, *inter alia*, an injunction against sheep ranchers who moved their herds across odd-numbered lots held by the appellants in order to graze their sheep on even-numbered public lots. This Court denied the requested relief because it was contrary to a century-old grazing custom. The Court also was influenced by the sheep ranchers' lack of any alternative.

"Upon the whole, we see no equity in the relief sought by the appellants in this case, which undertakes to deprive the defendants of this recognized right to permit their cattle to run at large over the lands of the United States and feed upon the grasses found in them, while, under pretence of owning a small proportion of the land which is the subject of controversy, they themselves obtain the monopoly of this valuable privilege." [133 U.S., at 332, 10 S.Ct. at 309.](#)
Here neither custom nor necessity supports the Government.

25 In 1887 the Secretary of the Interior recommended that Congress enact legislation providing for a public road around each section of public land to provide access to the various public lots in the checkerboard scheme. The Secretary also recommended that to the extent building these roads required the taking of property that had passed to private individuals, "the bill should provide for necessary compensation." 1 Report of the Secretary of the Interior for Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1887, p. 15 (1887); see also 1 Report of the Secretary of the Interior for Fiscal Year Ending June 30, 1888, p. xvii (1888).

26 See, *e. g.*, *Louisiana v. Garfield*, 211 U.S. 70, 76, 29 S.Ct. 31, 32, 53 L.Ed. 92 (1908); [Iron Silver Mining Co. v. Elgin Mining & Smelting Co.](#), 118 U.S. 196, 207–208, 6 S.Ct. 1177, 1183–1184, 30 L.Ed. 98 (1886); *Lessee of Irwin H. Doolittle's Lessee v. Bryan*, 14 How. (55 U.S.) 563, 567, 14 L.Ed. 543 (1853).

Reversed.

Mr. Justice WHITE took no part in the consideration or decision of this case.

135 S.Ct. 2480
Supreme Court of the United States

David KING, et al., Petitioners
v.
Sylvia BURWELL, Secretary of Health and Human Services, et al.
No. 14–114.

Argued March 4, 2015.

Decided June 25, 2015.

[[ROBERTS](#), C.J., delivered the opinion of the Court, in which [KENNEDY](#), [GINSBURG](#), [BREYER](#), [SOTOMAYOR](#), and [KAGAN](#), JJ., joined. [SCALIA](#), J., filed a dissenting opinion, in which [THOMAS](#) and [ALITO](#), JJ., joined.]

Chief Justice [ROBERTS](#) delivered the opinion of the Court.

[The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act grew out of a long history of failed health insurance reform. In the 1990s, several States sought to expand access to coverage by imposing a pair of insurance market regulations—a “guaranteed issue” requirement, which bars insurers from denying coverage to any person because of his health, and a “community rating” requirement, which bars insurers from charging a person higher premiums for the same reason. The reforms achieved the goal of expanding access to coverage, but they also encouraged people to wait until they got sick to buy insurance. The result was an economic “death spiral”: premiums rose, the number of people buying insurance declined, and insurers left the market entirely. In 2006, however, Massachusetts discovered a way to make the guaranteed issue and community rating requirements work—by requiring individuals to buy insurance and by providing tax credits to certain individuals to make insurance more affordable. The combination of these three reforms—insurance market regulations, a coverage mandate, and tax credits—enabled Massachusetts to drastically reduce its uninsured rate.

[The Affordable Care Act adopts a version of the three key reforms that made the Massachusetts system successful. First, the Act adopts the guaranteed issue and community rating requirements. [42 U.S.C. §§ 300gg, 300gg–1](#). Second, the Act generally requires individuals to maintain health insurance coverage or make a payment to the IRS, unless the cost of buying insurance would exceed eight percent of that individual’s income. [26 U.S.C. § 5000A](#). And third, the Act seeks to make insurance more affordable by giving refundable tax credits to individuals with household incomes between 100 percent and 400 percent of the federal poverty line. [§ 36B](#).

[In addition to those three reforms, the Act requires the creation of an “Exchange” in each State—basically, a marketplace that allows people to compare and purchase insurance plans. The Act gives each State the opportunity to establish its own Exchange, but provides that the Federal Government will establish “such Exchange” if the State does not. [42 U.S.C. §§ 18031, 18041](#). Relatedly, the Act provides that tax credits “shall be allowed” for any “applicable taxpayer,” [26 U.S.C. § 36B\(a\)](#), but only if the taxpayer has enrolled in an insurance plan through “an Exchange established by the State under [[42 U.S.C. § 18031](#)],” [§§ 36B\(b\)-\(c\)](#). An IRS regulation interprets that language as making tax credits available on “an Exchange,” [26 CFR § 1.36B–2](#), “regardless of whether the Exchange is established and operated by a State ... or by HHS,” [45 CFR § 155.20](#).]

....

A

We begin with the text of [Section 36B](#). As relevant here, [Section 36B](#) allows an individual to receive tax credits only if the individual enrolls in an insurance plan through “an Exchange established by the State under [\[42 U.S.C. § 18031\]](#).” In other words, three things must be true: First, the individual must enroll in an insurance plan through “an Exchange.” Second, that Exchange must be “established by the State.” And third, that Exchange must be established “under [\[42 U.S.C. § 18031\]](#).” We address each requirement in turn.

First, all parties agree that a Federal Exchange qualifies as “an Exchange” for purposes of [Section 36B](#). See Brief for Petitioners 22; Brief for Respondents 22. [Section 18031](#) provides that “[e]ach State shall ... establish an American Health Benefit Exchange ... for the State.” [§ 18031\(b\)\(1\)](#). Although phrased as a requirement, the Act gives the States “flexibility” by allowing them to “elect” whether they want to establish an Exchange. [§ 18041\(b\)](#). If the State chooses not to do so, [Section 18041](#) provides that the Secretary “shall ... establish and operate *such Exchange* within the State.” [§ 18041\(c\)\(1\)](#) (emphasis added).

By using the phrase “such Exchange,” [Section 18041](#) instructs the Secretary to establish and operate the *same* Exchange that the State was directed to establish under [Section 18031](#). See Black’s Law Dictionary 1661 (10th ed. 2014) (defining “such” as “That or those; having just been mentioned”). In other words, State Exchanges and Federal Exchanges are equivalent—they must meet the same requirements, perform the same functions, and serve the same purposes. Although State and Federal Exchanges are established by different sovereigns, [Sections 18031](#) and [18041](#) do not suggest that they differ in *2490 any meaningful way. A Federal Exchange therefore counts as “an Exchange” under [Section 36B](#).

Second, we must determine whether a Federal Exchange is “established by the State” for purposes of [Section 36B](#). At the outset, it might seem that a Federal Exchange cannot fulfill this requirement. After all, the Act defines “State” to mean “each of the 50 States and the District of Columbia”—a definition that does not include the Federal Government. [42 U.S.C. § 18024\(d\)](#). But when read in context, “with a view to [its] place in the overall statutory scheme,” the meaning of the phrase “established by the State” is not so clear. [Brown & Williamson, 529 U.S., at 133, 120 S.Ct. 1291](#) (internal quotation marks omitted).

After telling each State to establish an Exchange, [Section 18031](#) provides that all Exchanges “shall make available qualified health plans to qualified individuals.” [42 U.S.C. § 18031\(d\)\(2\)\(A\)](#). [Section 18032](#) then defines the term “qualified individual” in part as an individual who “resides in the State that established the Exchange.” [§ 18032\(f\)\(1\)\(A\)](#). And that’s a problem: If we give the phrase “the State that established the Exchange” its most natural meaning, there would be *no* “qualified individuals” on Federal Exchanges. But the Act clearly contemplates that there will be qualified individuals on *every* Exchange. As we just mentioned, the Act requires all Exchanges to “make available qualified health plans to qualified individuals”—something an Exchange could not do if there were no such individuals. [§ 18031\(d\)\(2\)\(A\)](#). And the Act tells the Exchange, in deciding which health plans to offer, to consider “the interests of qualified individuals ... in the State or States in which such Exchange operates”—again, something the Exchange could not do if qualified individuals did not exist. [§ 18031\(e\)\(1\)\(B\)](#). This problem arises repeatedly throughout the Act. See, e.g., [§ 18031\(b\)\(2\)](#) (allowing a State to create “one Exchange ... for providing ... services to both qualified individuals and qualified small employers,” rather than creating separate Exchanges for those two groups).¹

1 The dissent argues that one would “naturally read instructions about qualified individuals to be inapplicable to the extent a particular Exchange has no such individuals.” *Post*, at 2501 – 2502 (SCALIA, J., dissenting). But the fact that the dissent's interpretation would make so many parts of the Act “inapplicable” to Federal Exchanges is precisely what creates the problem. It would be odd indeed for Congress to write such detailed instructions about customers on a State Exchange, while having nothing to say about those on a Federal Exchange.

These provisions suggest that the Act may not always use the phrase “established by the State” in its most natural sense. Thus, the meaning of that phrase may not be as clear as it appears when read out of context.

Third, we must determine whether a Federal Exchange is established “under [\[42 U.S.C. § 18031\]](#).” This too might seem a requirement that a Federal Exchange cannot fulfill, because it is [Section 18041](#) that tells the Secretary when to “establish and operate such Exchange.” But here again, the way different provisions in the statute interact suggests otherwise.

The Act defines the term “Exchange” to mean “an American Health Benefit Exchange established under [section 18031](#).” § 300gg–91(d)(21). If we import that definition into [Section 18041](#), the Act tells the Secretary to “establish and operate such ‘American Health Benefit Exchange established under [section 18031](#).’” That suggests that [Section 18041](#) authorizes the Secretary to establish an Exchange under [Section 18031](#), not (or not only) under [Section 18041](#). Otherwise, the Federal Exchange, by definition, would not be an “Exchange” at all. See *Halbig*, 758 F.3d, at [399–400](#) (acknowledging that the Secretary establishes Federal Exchanges under [Section 18031](#)).

This interpretation of “under [\[42 U.S.C. § 18031\]](#)” fits best with the statutory context. All of the requirements that an Exchange must meet are in [Section 18031](#), so it is sensible to regard all Exchanges as established under that provision. In addition, every time the Act uses the word “Exchange,” the definitional provision requires that we substitute the phrase “Exchange established under [section 18031](#).” If Federal Exchanges were not established under [Section 18031](#), therefore, literally none of the Act's requirements would apply to them. Finally, the Act repeatedly uses the phrase “established under [\[42 U.S.C. § 18031\]](#)” in situations where it would make no sense to distinguish between State and Federal Exchanges. See, e.g., [26 U.S.C. § 125\(f\)\(3\)\(A\)](#) (2012 ed., Supp. I) (“The term ‘qualified benefit’ shall not include any qualified health plan ... offered through an Exchange established under [\[42 U.S.C. § 18031\]](#)”); [26 U.S.C. § 6055\(b\)\(1\)\(B\)\(iii\)\(I\)](#) (2012 ed.) (requiring insurers to report whether each insurance plan they provided “is a qualified health plan offered through an Exchange established under [\[42 U.S.C. § 18031\]](#)”). A Federal Exchange may therefore be considered one established “under [\[42 U.S.C. § 18031\]](#).”

The upshot of all this is that the phrase “an Exchange established by the State under [\[42 U.S.C. § 18031\]](#)” is properly viewed as ambiguous. The phrase may be limited in its reach to State Exchanges. But it is also possible that the phrase refers to *all* Exchanges—both State and Federal—at least for purposes of the tax credits. If a State chooses not to follow the directive in [Section 18031](#) that it establish an Exchange, the Act tells the Secretary to establish “such Exchange.” [§ 18041](#). And by using the words “such Exchange,” the Act indicates that State and Federal Exchanges should be the same. But State and Federal Exchanges would differ in a fundamental way if tax credits were available only on State Exchanges—one type of Exchange would help make insurance more affordable by providing billions of dollars to the States' citizens; the other type of Exchange would not.²

2 The dissent argues that the phrase “such Exchange” does not suggest that State and Federal Exchanges “are in all respects equivalent.” *Post*, at 2500. In support, it quotes the Constitution’s Elections Clause, which makes the state legislature primarily responsible for prescribing election regulations, but allows Congress to “make or alter such Regulations.” Art. I, § 4, cl. 1. No one would say that state and federal election regulations are in all respects equivalent, the dissent contends, so we should not say that State and Federal Exchanges are. But the Elections Clause does not precisely define what an election regulation must look like, so Congress can prescribe regulations that differ from what the State would prescribe. The Affordable Care Act *does* precisely define what an Exchange must look like, however, so a Federal Exchange cannot differ from a State Exchange.

The conclusion that [Section 36B](#) is ambiguous is further supported by several provisions that assume tax credits will be available on both State and Federal Exchanges. For example, the Act requires all Exchanges to create outreach programs that must “distribute fair and impartial information concerning ... the availability of premium tax credits under [section 36B](#).” [§ 18031\(i\)\(3\)\(B\)](#). The Act also requires all Exchanges to “establish and make available *2492 by electronic means a calculator to determine the actual cost of coverage after the application of any premium tax credit under [section 36B](#).” [§ 18031\(d\)\(4\)\(G\)](#). And the Act requires all Exchanges to report to the Treasury Secretary information about each health plan they sell, including the “aggregate amount of any advance payment of such credit,” “[a]ny information ... necessary to determine eligibility for, and the amount of, such credit,” and any “[i]nformation necessary to determine whether a taxpayer has received excess advance payments.” [26 U.S.C. § 36B\(f\)\(3\)](#). If tax credits were not available on Federal Exchanges, these provisions would make little sense.

Petitioners and the dissent respond that the words “established by the State” would be unnecessary if Congress meant to extend tax credits to both State and Federal Exchanges. Brief for Petitioners 20; *post*, at 2497 – 2498. But “our preference for avoiding surplusage constructions is not absolute.” [Lamie v. United States Trustee](#), 540 U.S. 526, 536, 124 S.Ct. 1023, 157 L.Ed.2d 1024 (2004); see also [Marx v. General Revenue Corp.](#), 568 U.S. ———, ———, 133 S.Ct. 1166, 1177, 185 L.Ed.2d 242 (2013) (“The canon against surplusage is not an absolute rule”). And specifically with respect to this Act, rigorous application of the canon does not seem a particularly useful guide to a fair construction of the statute.

The Affordable Care Act contains more than a few examples of inartful drafting. (To cite just one, the Act creates three separate Section 1563s. See 124 Stat. 270, 911, 912.) Several features of the Act’s passage contributed to that unfortunate reality. Congress wrote key parts of the Act behind closed doors, rather than through “the traditional legislative process.” Cannan, [A Legislative History of the Affordable Care Act: How Legislative Procedure Shapes Legislative History](#), 105 L. Lib. J. 131, 163 (2013). And Congress passed much of the Act using a complicated budgetary procedure known as “reconciliation,” which limited opportunities for debate and amendment, and bypassed the Senate’s normal 60–vote filibuster requirement. *Id.*, at 159–167. As a result, the Act does not reflect the type of care and deliberation that one might expect of such significant legislation. Cf. Frankfurter, Some Reflections on the Reading of Statutes, 47 Colum. L. Rev. 527, 545 (1947) (describing a cartoon “in which a senator tells his colleagues ‘I admit this new bill is too complicated to understand. We’ll just have to pass it to find out what it means.’”).

Anyway, we “must do our best, bearing in mind the fundamental canon of statutory construction that the words of a statute must be read in their context and with a view to their place in the overall statutory scheme.” [Utility Air Regulatory Group](#), 573 U.S., at ———, 134 S.Ct., at 2441 (internal quotation marks omitted). After reading [Section 36B](#) along with other related provisions in the Act, we cannot conclude that the phrase “an Exchange established by the State under [Section 18031](#)” is unambiguous.

B

Given that the text is ambiguous, we must turn to the broader structure of the Act to determine the meaning of [Section 36B](#). “A provision that may seem ambiguous in isolation is often clarified by the remainder of the statutory scheme ... because only one of the permissible meanings produces a substantive effect that is compatible with the rest of the law.” [United Sav. Assn. of Tex.](#)

v. Timbers of Inwood Forest Associates, Ltd., 484 U.S. 365, 371, 108 S.Ct. 626, 98 L.Ed.2d 740 (1988). Here, the statutory scheme compels *2493 us to reject petitioners' interpretation because it would destabilize the individual insurance market in any State with a Federal Exchange, and likely create the very “death spirals” that Congress designed the Act to avoid. See *New York State Dept. of Social Servs. v. Dublino*, 413 U.S. 405, 419–420, 93 S.Ct. 2507, 37 L.Ed.2d 688 (1973) (“We cannot interpret federal statutes to negate their own stated purposes.”).³

3 The dissent notes that several other provisions in the Act use the phrase “established by the State,” and argues that our holding applies to each of those provisions. *Post*, at 2498 – 2499. But “the presumption of consistent usage readily yields to context,” and a statutory term may mean different things in different places. *Utility Air Regulatory Group v. EPA*, 573 U.S. ———, ———, 134 S.Ct. 2427, 2441–2442, 189 L.Ed.2d 372 (2014) (internal quotation marks omitted). That is particularly true when, as here, “the Act is far from a *chef d'oeuvre* of legislative draftsmanship.” *Ibid*. Because the other provisions cited by the dissent are not at issue here, we do not address them.

As discussed above, Congress based the Affordable Care Act on three major reforms: first, the guaranteed issue and community rating requirements; second, a requirement that individuals maintain health insurance coverage or make a payment to the IRS; and third, the tax credits for individuals with household incomes between 100 percent and 400 percent of the federal poverty line. In a State that establishes its own Exchange, these three reforms work together to expand insurance coverage. The guaranteed issue and community rating requirements ensure that anyone can buy insurance; the coverage requirement creates an incentive for people to do so before they get sick; and the tax credits—it is hoped—make insurance more affordable. Together, those reforms “minimize ... adverse selection and broaden the health insurance risk pool to include healthy individuals, which will lower health insurance premiums.” 42 U.S.C. § 18091(2)(I).

Under petitioners' reading, however, the Act would operate quite differently in a State with a Federal Exchange. As they see it, one of the Act's three major reforms—the tax credits—would not apply. And a second major reform—the coverage requirement—would not apply in a meaningful way. As explained earlier, the coverage requirement applies only when the cost of buying health insurance (minus the amount of the tax credits) is less than eight percent of an individual's income. 26 U.S.C. §§ 5000A(e)(1)(A), (e)(1)(B)(ii). So without the tax credits, the coverage requirement would apply to fewer individuals. And it would be a *lot* fewer. In 2014, approximately 87 percent of people who bought insurance on a Federal Exchange did so with tax credits, and virtually all of those people would become exempt. HHS, A. Burke, A. Misra, & S. Sheingold, *Premium Affordability, Competition, and Choice in the Health Insurance Marketplace 5* (2014); Brief for Bipartisan Economic Scholars as *Amici Curiae* 19–20. If petitioners are right, therefore, only one of the Act's three major reforms would apply in States with a Federal Exchange.

The combination of no tax credits and an ineffective coverage requirement could well push a State's individual insurance market into a death spiral. One study predicts that premiums would increase by 47 percent and enrollment would decrease by 70 percent. E. Saltzman & C. Eibner, *The Effect of Eliminating the Affordable Care Act's Tax Credits in Federally Facilitated Marketplaces* (2015). Another study predicts that premiums would increase by 35 percent and enrollment would decrease by 69 percent. L. Blumberg, M. Buettgens, & J. Holahan, *The Implications of a Supreme Court Finding for the Plaintiff in *2494 King vs. Burwell: 8.2 Million More Uninsured and 35% Higher Premiums* (2015). And those effects would not be limited to individuals who purchase insurance on the Exchanges. Because the Act requires insurers to treat the entire individual market as a single risk pool, 42 U.S.C. § 18032(c)(1), premiums outside the Exchange would rise along with those inside the Exchange. Brief for Bipartisan Economic Scholars as *Amici Curiae* 11–12.

It is implausible that Congress meant the Act to operate in this manner. See *National Federation of Independent Business v. Sebelius*, 567 U.S. ———, ———, 132 S.Ct. 2566, 2674, 183 L.Ed.2d 450 (2012) (SCALIA, KENNEDY, THOMAS, and ALITO, JJ., dissenting) (“Without the federal subsidies ... the exchanges would not operate as Congress intended and may not operate at all.”).

Congress made the guaranteed issue and community rating requirements applicable in every State in the Nation. But those requirements only work when combined with the coverage requirement and the tax credits. So it stands to reason that Congress meant for those provisions to apply in every State as well.⁴

⁴ The dissent argues that our analysis “show[s] only that the statutory scheme contains a flaw,” one “that appeared as well in other parts of the Act.” *Post*, at 2503. For support, the dissent notes that the guaranteed issue and community rating requirements might apply in the federal territories, even though the coverage requirement does not. *Id.*, at 2503 – 2504. The confusion arises from the fact that the guaranteed issue and community rating requirements were added as amendments to the Public Health Service Act, which contains a definition of the word “State” that includes the territories, [42 U.S.C. § 201\(f\)](#), while the later-enacted Affordable Care Act contains a definition of the word “State” that excludes the territories, [§ 18024\(d\)](#). The predicate for the dissent's point is therefore uncertain at best.

The dissent also notes that a different part of the Act “established a long-term-care insurance program with guaranteed-issue and community-rating requirements, but without an individual mandate or subsidies.” *Post*, at 2503. True enough. But the fact that Congress was willing to accept the risk of adverse selection in a comparatively minor program does not show that Congress was willing to do so in the general health insurance program—the very heart of the Act. Moreover, Congress said expressly that it wanted to avoid adverse selection in the *health* insurance markets. [§ 18091\(2\)\(1\)](#).

Petitioners respond that Congress was not worried about the effects of withholding tax credits from States with Federal Exchanges because “Congress evidently believed it was offering states a deal they would not refuse.” Brief for Petitioners 36. Congress may have been wrong about the States' willingness to establish their own Exchanges, petitioners continue, but that does not allow this Court to rewrite the Act to fix that problem. That is particularly true, petitioners conclude, because the States likely *would* have created their own Exchanges in the absence of the IRS Rule, which eliminated any incentive that the States had to do so. *Id.*, at 36–38.

[Section 18041](#) refutes the argument that Congress believed it was offering the States a deal they would not refuse. That section provides that, if a State elects not to establish an Exchange, the Secretary “shall ... establish and operate such Exchange within the State.” [42 U.S.C. § 18041\(c\)\(1\)\(A\)](#). The whole point of that provision is to create a federal fallback in case a State chooses not to establish its own Exchange. Contrary to petitioners' argument, Congress did not believe it was offering States a deal they would not refuse—it expressly addressed what would happen if a State *did* refuse the deal.

C

Finally, the structure of [Section 36B](#) itself suggests that tax credits are not *2495 limited to State Exchanges. [Section 36B\(a\)](#) initially provides that tax credits “shall be allowed” for any “applicable taxpayer.” [Section 36B\(c\)\(1\)](#) then defines an “applicable taxpayer” as someone who (among other things) has a household income between 100 percent and 400 percent of the federal poverty line. Together, these two provisions appear to make anyone in the specified income range eligible to receive a tax credit.

According to petitioners, however, those provisions are an empty promise in States with a Federal Exchange. In their view, an applicable taxpayer in such a State would be *eligible* for a tax credit—but the *amount* of that tax credit would always be zero. And that is because—diving several layers down into the Tax Code—[Section 36B](#) says that the amount of the tax credits shall be “an amount equal to the premium assistance credit amount,” [§ 36B\(a\)](#); and then says that the term “premium assistance credit amount” means “the sum of the premium assistance amounts determined under paragraph (2) with respect to all coverage months of the taxpayer occurring during the taxable year,” [§ 36B\(b\)\(1\)](#); and then says that the term “premium assistance amount” is tied to the amount of the monthly premium for insurance purchased on “an Exchange established by the State under [[42 U.S.C. § 18031](#)],” [§ 36B\(b\)\(2\)](#); and then says that the term

“coverage month” means any month in which the taxpayer has insurance through “an Exchange established by the State under [\[42 U.S.C. § 18031\]](#),” [§ 36B\(c\)\(2\)\(A\)\(i\)](#).

We have held that Congress “does not alter the fundamental details of a regulatory scheme in vague terms or ancillary provisions.” [Whitman v. American Trucking Assns., Inc.](#), [531 U.S. 457, 468, 121 S.Ct. 903, 149 L.Ed.2d 1 \(2001\)](#). But in petitioners' view, Congress made the viability of the entire Affordable Care Act turn on the ultimate ancillary provision: a sub-sub-sub section of the Tax Code. We doubt that is what Congress meant to do. Had Congress meant to limit tax credits to State Exchanges, it likely would have done so in the definition of “applicable taxpayer” or in some other prominent manner. It would not have used such a winding path of connect-the-dots provisions about the amount of the credit.⁵

⁵ The dissent cites several provisions that “make[] taxpayers of all States eligible for a credit, only to provide later that the amount of the credit may be zero.” *Post*, at 2501 (citing [26 U.S.C. §§ 24, 32, 35, 36](#)). None of those provisions, however, is crucial to the viability of a comprehensive program like the Affordable Care Act. No one suggests, for example, that the first-time-homebuyer tax credit, [§ 36](#), is essential to the viability of federal housing regulation.

D

Petitioners' arguments about the plain meaning of [Section 36B](#) are strong. But while the meaning of the phrase “an Exchange established by the State under [\[42 U.S.C. § 18031\]](#)” may seem plain “when viewed in isolation,” such a reading turns out to be “untenable in light of [the statute] as a whole.” [Department of Revenue of Ore. v. ACF Industries, Inc.](#), [510 U.S. 332, 343, 114 S.Ct. 843, 127 L.Ed.2d 165 \(1994\)](#). In this instance, the context and structure of the Act compel us to depart from what would otherwise be the most natural reading of the pertinent statutory phrase.

Reliance on context and structure in statutory interpretation is a “subtle business, calling for great wariness lest what professes to be mere rendering becomes creation and attempted interpretation *2496 of legislation becomes legislation itself.” [Palmer v. Massachusetts](#), [308 U.S. 79, 83, 60 S.Ct. 34, 84 L.Ed. 93 \(1939\)](#). For the reasons we have given, however, such reliance is appropriate in this case, and leads us to conclude that [Section 36B](#) allows tax credits for insurance purchased on any Exchange created under the Act. Those credits are necessary for the Federal Exchanges to function like their State Exchange counterparts, and to avoid the type of calamitous result that Congress plainly meant to avoid.

* * *

In a democracy, the power to make the law rests with those chosen by the people. Our role is more confined—“to say what the law is.” [Marbury v. Madison](#), [1 Cranch 137, 177, 2 L.Ed. 60 \(1803\)](#). That is easier in some cases than in others. But in every case we must respect the role of the Legislature, and take care not to undo what it has done. A fair reading of legislation demands a fair understanding of the legislative plan.

Congress passed the Affordable Care Act to improve health insurance markets, not to destroy them. If at all possible, we must interpret the Act in a way that is consistent with the former, and avoids the latter. [Section 36B](#) can fairly be read consistent with what we see as Congress's plan, and that is the reading we adopt.

The judgment of the United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit is

Affirmed.

Justice [SCALIA](#), with whom Justice [THOMAS](#) and Justice [ALITO](#) join, dissenting.

The Court holds that when the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act says “Exchange established by the State” it means “Exchange established by the State or the Federal Government.” That is of course quite absurd, and the Court’s 21 pages of explanation make it no less so.

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act makes major reforms to the American health-insurance market. It provides, among other things, that every State “shall ... establish an American Health Benefit Exchange”—a marketplace where people can shop for health-insurance plans. [42 U.S.C. § 18031\(b\)\(1\)](#). And it provides that if a State does not comply with this instruction, the Secretary of Health and Human Services must “establish and operate such Exchange within the State.” [§ 18041\(c\)\(1\)](#).

A separate part of the Act—housed in [§ 36B of the Internal Revenue Code](#)—grants “premium tax credits” to subsidize certain purchases of health insurance made on Exchanges. The tax credit consists of “premium assistance amounts” for “coverage months.” [26 U.S.C. § 36B\(b\)\(1\)](#). An individual has a coverage month only when he is covered by an insurance plan “that was enrolled in through an Exchange established by the State under [[§ 18031](#)].” [§ 36B\(c\)\(2\)\(A\)](#). And the law ties the size of the premium assistance amount to the premiums for health plans which cover the individual “and which were enrolled in through an Exchange established by the State under [[§ 18031](#)].” [§ 36B\(b\)\(2\)\(A\)](#). The premium assistance amount further depends on the cost of certain other insurance plans “offered through the same Exchange.” [§ 36B\(b\)\(3\)\(B\)\(i\)](#).

This case requires us to decide whether someone who buys insurance on an Exchange established by the Secretary gets tax credits. You would think the answer would be obvious—so obvious there would hardly be a need for the Supreme Court to hear a case about it. In order to receive *2497 any money under [§ 36B](#), an individual must enroll in an insurance plan through an “Exchange established by the State.” The Secretary of Health and Human Services is not a State. So an Exchange established by the Secretary is not an Exchange established by the State—which means people who buy health insurance through such an Exchange get no money under [§ 36B](#).

Words no longer have meaning if an Exchange that is *not* established by a State is “established by the State.” It is hard to come up with a clearer way to limit tax credits to state Exchanges than to use the words “established by the State.” And it is hard to come up with a reason to include the words “by the State” other than the purpose of limiting credits to state Exchanges. “[T]he plain, obvious, and rational meaning of a statute is always to be preferred to any curious, narrow, hidden sense that nothing but the exigency of a hard case and the ingenuity and study of an acute and powerful intellect would discover.” [Lynch v. Alworth–Stephens Co., 267 U.S. 364, 370, 45 S.Ct. 274, 69 L.Ed. 660 \(1925\)](#) (internal quotation marks omitted). Under all the usual rules of interpretation, in short, the Government should lose this case. But normal rules of interpretation seem always to yield to the overriding principle of the present Court: The Affordable Care Act must be saved.

II

The Court interprets [§ 36B](#) to award tax credits on both federal and state Exchanges. It accepts that the “most natural sense” of the phrase “Exchange established by the State” is an Exchange established by a State. *Ante*, at 2502. (Understatement, thy name is an opinion on the Affordable Care Act!) Yet the opinion continues, with no semblance of shame, that “it is also possible that the phrase refers to *all* Exchanges—both State and Federal.” *Ante*, at 2491. (Impossible possibility, thy name is an opinion on the Affordable Care Act!) The Court claims that “the context and structure of the Act compel [it] to depart from what would otherwise be the most natural reading of the pertinent statutory phrase.” *Ante*, at 2495.

I wholeheartedly agree with the Court that sound interpretation requires paying attention to the whole law, not homing in on isolated words or even isolated sections. Context always matters. Let us not forget, however, *why* context matters: It is a tool for understanding the terms of the law, not an excuse for rewriting them.

Any effort to understand rather than to rewrite a law must accept and apply the presumption that lawmakers use words in “their natural and ordinary signification.” [*Pensacola Telegraph Co. v. Western Union Telegraph Co.*, 96 U.S. 1, 12, 24 L.Ed. 708 \(1878\)](#). Ordinary connotation does not always prevail, but the more unnatural the proposed interpretation of a law, the more compelling the contextual evidence must be to show that it is correct. Today's interpretation is not merely unnatural; it is unheard of. Who would ever have dreamt that “Exchange established by the State” means “Exchange established by the State *or the Federal Government*”? Little short of an express statutory definition could justify adopting this singular reading. Yet the only pertinent definition here provides that “State” means “each of the 50 States and the District of Columbia.” [42 U.S.C. § 18024\(d\)](#). Because the Secretary is neither one of the 50 States nor the District of Columbia, that definition positively contradicts the eccentric theory that an Exchange established by the Secretary has been established by the State.

Far from offering the overwhelming evidence of meaning needed to justify the *2498 Court's interpretation, other contextual clues undermine it at every turn. To begin with, other parts of the Act sharply distinguish between the establishment of an Exchange by a State and the establishment of an Exchange by the Federal Government. The States' authority to set up Exchanges comes from one provision, [§ 18031\(b\)](#); the Secretary's authority comes from an entirely different provision, [§ 18041\(c\)](#). Funding for States to establish Exchanges comes from one part of the law, [§ 18031\(a\)](#); funding for the Secretary to establish Exchanges comes from an entirely different part of the law, § 18121. States generally run state-created Exchanges; the Secretary generally runs federally created Exchanges. [§ 18041\(b\)-\(c\)](#). And the Secretary's authority to set up an Exchange in a State depends upon the State's “[f]ailure to establish [an] Exchange.” [§ 18041\(c\)](#) (emphasis added). Provisions such as these destroy any pretense that a federal Exchange is in some sense also established by a State.

Reading the rest of the Act also confirms that, as relevant here, there are *only* two ways to set up an Exchange in a State: establishment by a State and establishment by the Secretary. [§§ 18031\(b\), 18041\(c\)](#). So saying that an Exchange established by the Federal Government is “established by the State” goes beyond giving words bizarre meanings; it leaves the limiting phrase “by the State” with no operative effect at all. That is a stark violation of the elementary principle that requires an interpreter “to give effect, if possible, to every clause and word of a statute.” [Montclair v. Ramsdell](#), 107 U.S. 147, 152, 2 S.Ct. 391, 27 L.Ed. 431 (1883). In weighing this argument, it is well to remember the difference between giving a term a meaning that duplicates another part of the law, and giving a term no meaning at all. Lawmakers sometimes repeat themselves—whether out of a desire to add emphasis, a sense of belt-and-suspenders caution, or a lawyerly penchant for doublets (aid and abet, cease and desist, null and void). Lawmakers do not, however, tend to use terms that “have no operation at all.” [Marbury v. Madison](#), 1 Cranch 137, 174, 2 L.Ed. 60 (1803). So while the rule against treating a term as a redundancy is far from categorical, the rule against treating it as a nullity is as close to absolute as interpretive principles get. The Court's reading does not merely give “by the State” a duplicative effect; it causes the phrase to have no effect whatever.

Makng matters worse, the reader of the whole Act will come across a number of provisions beyond [§ 36B](#) that refer to the establishment of Exchanges by States. Adopting the Court's interpretation means nullifying the term “by the State” not just once, but again and again throughout the Act. Consider for the moment only those parts of the Act that mention an “Exchange established by the State” in connection with tax credits:

- The formula for calculating the amount of the tax credit, as already explained, twice mentions “an Exchange established by the State.” [26 U.S.C. § 36B\(b\)\(2\)\(A\), \(c\)\(2\)\(A\)\(i\)](#).
- The Act directs States to screen children for eligibility for “[tax credits] under [section 36B](#)” and for “any other assistance or subsidies available for coverage obtained through” an “Exchange established by the State.” [42 U.S.C. § 1396w-3\(b\)\(1\)\(B\)-\(C\)](#).
- The Act requires “an Exchange established by the State” to use a “secure electronic interface” to determine eligibility for (among other things) tax credits. [§ 1396w-3\(b\)\(1\)\(D\)](#).

- The Act authorizes “an Exchange established by the State” to make arrangements *2499 under which other state agencies “determine whether a State resident is eligible for [tax credits] under [section 36B](#).” [§ 1396w–3\(b\)\(2\)](#).
- The Act directs States to operate Web sites that allow anyone “who is eligible to receive [tax credits] under [section 36B](#)” to compare insurance plans offered through “an Exchange established by the State.” [§ 1396w–3\(b\)\(4\)](#).
- One of the Act's provisions addresses the enrollment of certain children in health plans “offered through an Exchange established by the State” and then discusses the eligibility of these children for tax credits. [§ 1397ee\(d\)\(3\)\(B\)](#).

It is bad enough for a court to cross out “by the State” once. But seven times?

Congress did not, by the way, repeat “Exchange established by the State under [§ 18031](#)” by rote throughout the Act. Quite the contrary, clause after clause of the law uses a more general term such as “Exchange” or “Exchange established under [§ 18031](#).” See, e.g., [42 U.S.C. §§ 18031\(k\), 18033; 26 U.S.C. § 6055](#). It is common sense that any speaker who says “Exchange” some of the time, but “Exchange established by the State” the rest of the time, probably means something by the contrast.

Equating establishment “by the State” with establishment by the Federal Government makes nonsense of other parts of the Act. The Act requires States to ensure (on pain of losing Medicaid funding) that any “Exchange established by the State” uses a “secure electronic interface” to determine an individual's eligibility for various benefits (including tax credits). [42 U.S.C. § 1396w–3\(b\)\(1\)\(D\)](#). How could a State control the type of electronic interface used by a federal Exchange? The Act allows a State to control contracting decisions made by “an Exchange established by the State.” [§ 18031\(f\)\(3\)](#). Why would a State get to control the contracting decisions of a federal Exchange? The Act also provides “Assistance to States to establish American Health Benefit Exchanges” and directs the Secretary to renew this funding “if the State ... is making progress ... toward ... establishing an Exchange.” [§ 18031\(a\)](#). Does a State that refuses to set up an Exchange still receive this funding, on the premise that Exchanges established by the Federal Government are really established by States? It is presumably in order to avoid these questions that the Court concludes that federal Exchanges count as state Exchanges only “for purposes of the tax credits.” *Ante*, at 2491. (Contrivance, thy name is an opinion on the Affordable Care Act!)

It is probably piling on to add that the Congress that wrote the Affordable Care Act knew how to equate two different types of Exchanges when it wanted to do so. The Act includes a clause providing that “[a] *territory* that ... establishes ... an Exchange ... shall be treated as a State” for certain purposes. [§ 18043\(a\)](#) (emphasis added). Tellingly, it does not include a comparable clause providing that the *Secretary* shall be treated as a State for purposes of [§ 36B](#) when *she* establishes an Exchange.

Faced with overwhelming confirmation that “Exchange established by the State” means what it looks like it means, the Court comes up with argument after feeble argument to support its contrary interpretation. None of its tries comes close to establishing the implausible conclusion that Congress used “by the State” to mean “by the State or not by the State.”

The Court emphasizes that if a State does not set up an Exchange, the Secretary must establish “such Exchange.” [§ 18041\(c\)](#). It claims that the word “such” *2500 implies that federal and state Exchanges are “the same.” *Ante*, at 2491. To see the error in this reasoning, one need only consider a parallel provision from our Constitution: “The Times, Places and Manner of holding Elections for Senators and Representatives, shall be prescribed in each State by the Legislature thereof; but the Congress may at any time by Law make or alter *such Regulations*.” Art. I, § 4, cl. 1 (emphasis added). Just as the Affordable Care Act directs States to establish Exchanges while allowing the Secretary to establish “such Exchange” as a fallback, the Elections Clause directs state legislatures to prescribe election regulations while allowing Congress to make “such Regulations” as a fallback. Would anybody refer to an election regulation made by Congress as

a “regulation prescribed by the state legislature”? Would anybody say that a federal election law and a state election law are in all respects equivalent? Of course not. The word “such” does not help the Court one whit. The Court’s argument also overlooks the rudimentary principle that a specific provision governs a general one. Even if it were true that the term “such Exchange” in [§ 18041\(c\)](#) implies that federal and state Exchanges are the same in general, the term “established by the State” in [§ 36B](#) makes plain that they differ when it comes to tax credits in particular.

The Court’s next bit of interpretive jiggery-pokery involves other parts of the Act that purportedly presuppose the availability of tax credits on both federal and state Exchanges. *Ante*, at 2491 – 2492. It is curious that the Court is willing to subordinate the express words of the section that grants tax credits to the mere implications of other provisions with only tangential connections to tax credits. One would think that interpretation would work the other way around. In any event, each of the provisions mentioned by the Court is perfectly consistent with limiting tax credits to state Exchanges. One of them says that the minimum functions of an Exchange include (alongside several tasks that have nothing to do with tax credits) setting up an electronic calculator that shows “the actual cost of coverage after the application of any premium tax credit.” [42 U.S.C. § 18031\(d\)\(4\)\(G\)](#). What stops a federal Exchange’s electronic calculator from telling a customer that his tax credit is zero? Another provision requires an Exchange’s outreach program to educate the public about health plans, to facilitate enrollment, and to “distribute fair and impartial information” about enrollment and “the availability of premium tax credits.” [§ 18031\(i\)\(3\)\(B\)](#). What stops a federal Exchange’s outreach program from fairly and impartially telling customers that no tax credits are available? A third provision requires an Exchange to report information about each insurance plan sold—including level of coverage, premium, name of the insured, and “amount of any advance payment” of the tax credit. [26 U.S.C. § 36B\(f\)\(3\)](#). What stops a federal Exchange’s report from confirming that no tax credits have been paid out?

The Court persists that these provisions “would make little sense” if no tax credits were available on federal Exchanges. *Ante*, at 2492. Even if that observation were true, it would show only oddity, not ambiguity. Laws often include unusual or mismatched provisions. The Affordable Care Act spans 900 pages; it would be amazing if its provisions all lined up perfectly with each other. This Court “does not revise legislation ... just because the text as written creates an apparent anomaly.” [Michigan v. Bay Mills Indian Community](#), 572 U.S. _____, _____, 134 S.Ct. 2024, 2033, 188 L.Ed.2d 1071 (2014). At any rate, the provisions cited by the Court are not particularly unusual. Each requires *2501 an Exchange to perform a standardized series of tasks, some aspects of which relate in some way to tax credits. It is entirely natural for slight mismatches to occur when, as here, lawmakers draft “a single statutory provision” to cover “different kinds” of situations. [Robers v. United States](#), 572 U.S. _____, _____, 134 S.Ct. 1854, 1858, 188 L.Ed.2d 885 (2014). Lawmakers need not, and often do not, “write extra language specifically exempting, phrase by phrase, applications in respect to which a portion of a phrase is not needed.” *Ibid*.

Roaming even farther afield from [§ 36B](#), the Court turns to the Act’s provisions about “qualified individuals.” *Ante*, at 2489 – 2490. Qualified individuals receive favored treatment on Exchanges, although customers who are not qualified individuals may also shop there. See [Halbig v. Burwell](#), 758 F.3d 390, 404–405 (C.A.D.C.2014). The Court claims that the Act must equate federal and state establishment of Exchanges when it defines a qualified individual as someone who (among other things) lives in the “State that established the Exchange,” [42 U.S.C. § 18032\(f\)\(1\)\(A\)](#). Otherwise, the Court says, there would be no qualified individuals on federal Exchanges, contradicting (for example) the provision requiring every Exchange to take the “‘interests of qualified individuals’” into account when selecting health plans. *Ante*, at 2490 (quoting [§ 18031\(e\)\(1\)\(b\)](#)). Pure applesauce. Imagine that a university sends around a bulletin reminding every professor to take the “interests of graduate students” into account when setting office hours, but that some professors teach only undergraduates. Would anybody reason that the bulletin implicitly presupposes that every professor has “graduate students,” so that “graduate students” must really mean “graduate or undergraduate students”? Surely not. Just as one naturally reads instructions about graduate students to be inapplicable to the extent a particular professor has no such students, so too would one naturally read instructions about qualified individuals to be inapplicable to the extent a particular Exchange has no such individuals. There is no need to rewrite the term “State that established the Exchange” in the definition of “qualified individual,” much less a need to rewrite the separate term “Exchange established by the State” in a separate part of the Act.

Least convincing of all, however, is the Court's attempt to uncover support for its interpretation in “the structure of [Section 36B](#) itself.” *Ante*, at 2494. The Court finds it strange that Congress limited the tax credit to state Exchanges in the formula for calculating the *amount* of the credit, rather than in the provision defining the range of taxpayers *eligible* for the credit. Had the Court bothered to look at the rest of the Tax Code, it would have seen that the structure it finds strange is in fact quite common. Consider, for example, the many provisions that initially make taxpayers of all incomes eligible for a tax credit, only to provide later that the amount of the credit is zero if the taxpayer's income exceeds a specified threshold. See, *e.g.*, [26 U.S.C. § 24](#) (child tax credit); [§ 32](#) (earned-income tax credit); [§ 36](#) (first-time-homebuyer tax credit). Or consider, for an even closer parallel, a neighboring provision that initially makes taxpayers of all States eligible for a credit, only to provide later that the amount of the credit may be zero if the taxpayer's State does not satisfy certain requirements. See [§ 35](#) (health-insurance-costs tax credit). One begins to get the sense that the Court's insistence on reading things in context applies to “established by the State,” but to nothing else.

For what it is worth, lawmakers usually draft tax-credit provisions the way they do—*i.e.*, the way they drafted [§ 36B](#)—*2502 because the mechanics of the credit require it. Many Americans move to new States in the middle of the year. Mentioning state Exchanges in the definition of “coverage month”—rather than (as the Court proposes) in the provisions concerning taxpayers' eligibility for the credit—accounts for taxpayers who live in a State with a state Exchange for a part of the year, but a State with a federal Exchange for the rest of the year. In addition, [§ 36B](#) awards a credit with respect to insurance plans “which cover the taxpayer, *the taxpayer's spouse, or any dependent... of the taxpayer* and which were enrolled in through an Exchange established by the State.” [§ 36B\(b\)\(2\)\(A\)](#) (emphasis added). If Congress had mentioned state Exchanges in the provisions discussing taxpayers' eligibility for the credit, a taxpayer who buys insurance from a federal Exchange would get no money, even if he has a spouse or dependent who buys insurance from a state Exchange—say a child attending college in a different State. It thus makes perfect sense for “Exchange established by the State” to appear where it does, rather than where the Court suggests. Even if that were not so, of course, its location would not make it any less clear.

The Court has not come close to presenting the compelling contextual case necessary to justify departing from the ordinary meaning of the terms of the law. Quite the contrary, context only underscores the outlandishness of the Court's interpretation. Reading the Act as a whole leaves no doubt about the matter: “Exchange established by the State” means what it looks like it means.

III

For its next defense of the indefensible, the Court turns to the Affordable Care Act's design and purposes. As relevant here, the Act makes three major reforms. The guaranteed-issue and community-rating requirements prohibit insurers from considering a customer's health when deciding whether to sell insurance and how much to charge, [42 U.S.C. §§ 300gg, 300gg–1](#); its famous individual mandate requires everyone to maintain insurance coverage or to pay what the Act calls a “penalty,” [26 U.S.C. § 5000A\(b\)\(1\)](#), and what we have nonetheless called a tax, see [National Federation of Independent Business v. Sebelius](#), [567 U.S. ———, ———, 132 S.Ct. 2566, 2597–2598, 183 L.Ed.2d 450 \(2012\)](#); and its tax credits help make insurance more affordable. The Court reasons that Congress intended these three reforms to “work together to expand insurance coverage”; and because the first two apply in every State, so must the third. *Ante*, at 2493.

This reasoning suffers from no shortage of flaws. To begin with, “even the most formidable argument concerning the statute's purposes could not overcome the clarity [of] the statute's text.” [Kloeckner v. Solis](#), [568 U.S. ———, ———, n. 4, 133 S.Ct. 596, 607, n. 4, 184 L.Ed.2d 433 \(2012\)](#). Statutory design and purpose matter only to the extent they help clarify an otherwise ambiguous provision. Could anyone maintain with a straight face that [§ 36B](#) is unclear? To mention just the highlights, the Court's interpretation clashes with a statutory definition, renders words inoperative in at least seven separate provisions of the Act, overlooks the contrast between provisions that say “Exchange” and those that say “Exchange established by the State,” gives the same phrase one meaning for purposes of tax credits but an entirely different meaning for other

purposes, and (let us not forget) contradicts the ordinary meaning of the words Congress used. On the other side of the ledger, the Court has come up with nothing more than a general provision that turns out to be controlled by *2503 a specific one, a handful of clauses that are consistent with either understanding of establishment by the State, and a resemblance between the tax-credit provision and the rest of the Tax Code. If that is all it takes to make something ambiguous, everything is ambiguous.

Having gone wrong in consulting statutory purpose at all, the Court goes wrong again in analyzing it. The purposes of a law must be “collected chiefly from its words,” not “from extrinsic circumstances.” *Sturges v. Crowninshield*, 4 Wheat. 122, 202, 4 L.Ed. 529 (1819) (Marshall, C.J.). Only by concentrating on the law’s terms can a judge hope to uncover the scheme of the statute, rather than some other scheme that the judge thinks desirable. Like it or not, the express terms of the Affordable Care Act make only two of the three reforms mentioned by the Court applicable in States that do not establish Exchanges. It is perfectly possible for them to operate independently of tax credits. The guaranteed-issue and community-rating requirements continue to ensure that insurance companies treat all customers the same no matter their health, and the individual mandate continues to encourage people to maintain coverage, lest they be “taxed.”

The Court protests that without the tax credits, the number of people covered by the individual mandate shrinks, and without a broadly applicable individual mandate the guaranteed-issue and community-rating requirements “would destabilize the individual insurance market.” *Ante*, at 2493. If true, these projections would show only that the statutory scheme contains a flaw; they would not show that the statute means the opposite of what it says. Moreover, it is a flaw that appeared as well in other parts of the Act. A different title established a long-term-care insurance program with guaranteed-issue and community-rating requirements, but without an individual mandate or subsidies. §§ 8001–8002, 124 Stat. 828–847 (2010). This program never came into effect “only because Congress, in response to actuarial analyses predicting that the [program] would be fiscally unsustainable, repealed the provision in 2013.” *Halbig*, 758 F.3d, at 410. How could the Court say that Congress would never dream of combining guaranteed-issue and community-rating requirements with a narrow individual mandate, when it combined those requirements with *no* individual mandate in the context of long-term-care insurance?

Similarly, the Department of Health and Human Services originally interpreted the Act to impose guaranteed-issue and community-rating requirements in the Federal Territories, even though the Act plainly does not make the individual mandate applicable there. *Ibid.*; see 26 U.S.C. § 5000A(f)(4); 42 U.S.C. § 201(f). “This combination, predictably, [threw] individual insurance markets in the territories into turmoil.” *Halbig*, *supra*, at 410. Responding to complaints from the Territories, the Department at first insisted that it had “no statutory authority” to address the problem and suggested that the Territories “seek legislative relief from Congress” instead. Letter from G. Cohen, Director of the Center for Consumer Information and Insurance Oversight, to S. Igisomar, Secretary of Commerce of the Commonwealth of Northern Mariana Islands (July 12, 2013). The Department changed its mind a year later, after what it described as “a careful review of [the] situation and the relevant statutory language.” Letter from M. Tavenner, Administrator of the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, to G. Francis, Insurance Commissioner of the Virgin Islands (July 16, 2014). How could the Court pronounce it “implausible” for Congress to have tolerated instability in insurance *2504 markets in States with federal Exchanges, *ante*, at 2494, when even the Government maintained until recently that Congress did exactly that in American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands?

Compounding its errors, the Court forgets that it is no more appropriate to consider one of a statute’s purposes in isolation than it is to consider one of its words that way. No law pursues just one purpose at all costs, and no statutory scheme encompasses just one element. Most relevant here, the Affordable Care Act displays a congressional preference for state participation in the establishment of Exchanges: Each State gets the first opportunity to set up its Exchange, 42 U.S.C. § 18031(b); States that take up the opportunity receive federal funding for “activities ... related to establishing” an Exchange, § 18031(a)(3); and the Secretary may establish an Exchange in a State only as a fallback, § 18041(c). But setting up and running an Exchange involve significant burdens—meeting strict deadlines, § 18041(b), implementing requirements related to the offering of insurance plans, § 18031(d)(4), setting up outreach programs, § 18031(i), and ensuring that the Exchange is self-sustaining by 2015, § 18031(d)(5)(A). A State would have much less reason to

take on these burdens if its citizens could receive tax credits no matter who establishes its Exchange. (Now that the Internal Revenue Service has interpreted [§ 36B](#) to authorize tax credits everywhere, by the way, 34 States have failed to set up their own Exchanges. *Ante*, at 2487.) So even if making credits available on all Exchanges advances the goal of improving healthcare markets, it frustrates the goal of encouraging state involvement in the implementation of the Act. *This is what justifies going out of our way to read “established by the State” to mean “established by the State or not established by the State”?*

Worst of all for the repute of today's decision, the Court's reasoning is largely self-defeating. The Court predicts that making tax credits unavailable in States that do not set up their own Exchanges would cause disastrous economic consequences there. If that is so, however, wouldn't one expect States to react by setting up their own Exchanges? And wouldn't that outcome satisfy two of the Act's goals rather than just one: enabling the Act's reforms to work *and* promoting state involvement in the Act's implementation? The Court protests that the very existence of a federal fallback shows that Congress expected that some States might fail to set up their own Exchanges. *Ante*, at 2495. So it does. It does not show, however, that Congress expected the number of recalcitrant States to be particularly large. The more accurate the Court's dire economic predictions, the smaller that number is likely to be. That reality destroys the Court's pretense that applying the law as written would imperil “the viability of the entire Affordable Care Act.” *Ante*, at 2495. All in all, the Court's arguments about the law's purpose and design are no more convincing than its arguments about context.

IV

Perhaps sensing the dismal failure of its efforts to show that “established by the State” means “established by the State or the Federal Government,” the Court tries to palm off the pertinent statutory phrase as “inartful drafting.” *Ante*, at 2495. This Court, however, has no free-floating power “to rescue Congress from its drafting errors.” [Lamie v. United States Trustee, 540 U.S. 526, 542, 124 S.Ct. 1023, 157 L.Ed.2d 1024 \(2004\)](#) (internal quotation marks omitted). Only when it is patently *2505 obvious to a reasonable reader that a drafting mistake has occurred may a court correct the mistake. The occurrence of a misprint may be apparent from the face of the law, as it is where the Affordable Care Act “creates three separate Section 1563s.” *Ante*, at 2492. But the Court does not pretend that there is any such indication of a drafting error on the face of [§ 36B](#). The occurrence of a misprint may also be apparent because a provision decrees an absurd result—a consequence “so monstrous, that all mankind would, without hesitation, unite in rejecting the application.” [Sturges, 4 Wheat., at 203](#). But [§ 36B](#) does not come remotely close to satisfying that demanding standard. It is entirely plausible that tax credits were restricted to state Exchanges deliberately—for example, in order to encourage States to establish their own Exchanges. We therefore have no authority to dismiss the terms of the law as a drafting fumble.

Let us not forget that the term “Exchange established by the State” appears twice in [§ 36B](#) and five more times in other parts of the Act that mention tax credits. What are the odds, do you think, that the same slip of the pen occurred in seven separate places? No provision of the Act—none at all—contradicts the limitation of tax credits to state Exchanges. And as I have already explained, uses of the term “Exchange established by the State” beyond the context of tax credits look anything but accidental. *Supra*, at 2487. If there was a mistake here, context suggests it was a substantive mistake in designing this part of the law, not a technical mistake in transcribing it.

V

The Court's decision reflects the philosophy that judges should endure whatever interpretive distortions it takes in order to correct a supposed flaw in the statutory machinery. That philosophy ignores the American people's decision to give *Congress* “[a]ll legislative Powers” enumerated in the Constitution. Art. I, § 1. They made Congress, not this Court, responsible for both making laws and mending them. This Court holds only the judicial power—the power to pronounce the law as Congress has enacted it. We lack the prerogative to repair laws that do not work out in practice, just as the people lack the ability to throw us out of office if they dislike the

solutions we concoct. We must always remember, therefore, that “[o]ur task is to apply the text, not to improve upon it.” [*Pavelic & LeFlore v. Marvel Entertainment Group, Div. of Cadence Industries Corp.*](#), 493 U.S. 120, 126, 110 S.Ct. 456, 107 L.Ed.2d 438 (1989).

Trying to make its judge-empowering approach seem respectful of congressional authority, the Court asserts that its decision merely ensures that the Affordable Care Act operates the way Congress “meant [it] to operate.” *Ante*, at 2494. First of all, what makes the Court so sure that Congress “meant” tax credits to be available everywhere? Our only evidence of what Congress meant comes from the terms of the law, and those terms show beyond all question that tax credits are available only on state Exchanges. More importantly, the Court forgets that ours is a government of laws and not of men. That means we are governed by the terms of our laws, not by the unenacted will of our lawmakers. “If Congress enacted into law something different from what it intended, then it should amend the statute to conform to its intent.” [*Lamie, supra*](#), at 542, 124 S.Ct. 1023. In the meantime, this Court “has no roving license ... to disregard clear language simply on the view that ... Congress ‘must have intended’ something broader.” [*Bay Mills*](#), 572 U.S., at ———, 134 S.Ct., at 2034.

*2506 Even less defensible, if possible, is the Court's claim that its interpretive approach is justified because this Act “does not reflect the type of care and deliberation that one might expect of such significant legislation.” *Ante*, at 2492 – 2493. It is not our place to judge the quality of the care and deliberation that went into this or any other law. A law enacted by voice vote with no deliberation whatever is fully as binding upon us as one enacted after years of study, months of committee hearings, and weeks of debate. Much less is it our place to make everything come out right when Congress does not do its job properly. It is up to Congress to design its laws with care, and it is up to the people to hold them to account if they fail to carry out that responsibility.

Rather than rewriting the law under the pretense of interpreting it, the Court should have left it to Congress to decide what to do about the Act's limitation of tax credits to state Exchanges. If Congress values above everything else the Act's applicability across the country, it could make tax credits available in every Exchange. If it prizes state involvement in the Act's implementation, it could continue to limit tax credits to state Exchanges while taking other steps to mitigate the economic consequences predicted by the Court. If Congress wants to accommodate both goals, it could make tax credits available everywhere while offering new incentives for States to set up their own Exchanges. And if Congress thinks that the present design of the Act works well enough, it could do nothing. Congress could also do something else altogether, entirely abandoning the structure of the Affordable Care Act. The Court's insistence on making a choice that should be made by Congress both aggrandizes judicial power and encourages congressional lassitude.

Just ponder the significance of the Court's decision to take matters into its own hands. The Court's revision of the law authorizes the Internal Revenue Service to spend tens of billions of dollars every year in tax credits on federal Exchanges. It affects the price of insurance for millions of Americans. It diminishes the participation of the States in the implementation of the Act. It vastly expands the reach of the Act's individual mandate, whose scope depends in part on the availability of credits. What a parody today's decision makes of Hamilton's assurances to the people of New York: “The legislature not only commands the purse but prescribes the rules by which the duties and rights of every citizen are to be regulated. The judiciary, on the contrary, has no influence over ... the purse; no direction ... of the wealth of society, and can take no active resolution whatever. It may truly be said to have neither force nor will but merely judgment.” The Federalist No. 78, p. 465 (C. Rossiter ed. 1961).

* * *

Today's opinion changes the usual rules of statutory interpretation for the sake of the Affordable Care Act. That, alas, is not a novelty. In [*National Federation of Independent Business v. Sebelius*](#), 567 U.S. ———, 132 S.Ct. 2566, 183 L.Ed.2d 450 this Court revised major components of the statute in order to save them from unconstitutionality. The Act that Congress passed provides that every individual “shall” maintain insurance or else pay a “penalty.” [26 U.S.C. § 5000A](#). This Court, however, saw that the Commerce Clause does not authorize a federal mandate to buy health insurance. So it rewrote the mandate-cum-penalty as a tax. [567 U.S.](#), at ——— ———, 132 S.Ct.,

[at 2583–2601](#) (principal opinion). The Act that Congress passed also requires every State to accept an expansion of its Medicaid program, or else risk losing *all* Medicaid *2507 funding. [42 U.S.C. § 1396c](#). This Court, however, saw that the Spending Clause does not authorize this coercive condition. So it rewrote the law to withhold only the *incremental* funds associated with the Medicaid expansion. [567 U.S., at -----](#), [132 S.Ct., at 2601–2608](#) (principal opinion). Having transformed two major parts of the law, the Court today has turned its attention to a third. The Act that Congress passed makes tax credits available only on an “Exchange established by the State.” This Court, however, concludes that this limitation would prevent the rest of the Act from working as well as hoped. So it rewrites the law to make tax credits available everywhere. We should start calling this law SCOTUScare.

Perhaps the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act will attain the enduring status of the Social Security Act or the Taft–Hartley Act; perhaps not. But this Court's two decisions on the Act will surely be remembered through the years. The somersaults of statutory interpretation they have performed (“penalty” means tax, “further [Medicaid] payments to the State” means only incremental Medicaid payments to the State, “established by the State” means not established by the State) will be cited by litigants endlessly, to the confusion of honest jurisprudence. And the cases will publish forever the discouraging truth that the Supreme Court of the United States favors some laws over others, and is prepared to do whatever it takes to uphold and assist its favorites.

I dissent.

136 S.Ct. 958
Supreme Court of the United States

Avondale LOCKHART, Petitioner

v.
UNITED STATES.
No. 14–8358.

Argued Nov. 3, 2015.

Decided March 1, 2016.

Justice [SOTOMAYOR](#) delivered the opinion of the Court.

....

I

In April 2000, Avondale Lockhart was convicted of sexual abuse in the first degree under N.Y. Penal Law Ann. § 130.65(1) (West Cum. Supp. 2015). The *962 crime involved his then–53–year–old girlfriend. Presentence Investigation Report (PSR), in No. 11–CR–231–01, p. 13, ¶¶ 47–48. Eleven years later, Lockhart was indicted in the Eastern District of New York for attempting to receive child pornography in violation of [18 U.S.C. § 2252\(a\)\(2\)](#) and for possessing child pornography in violation of [§ 2252\(a\)\(4\)\(b\)](#). Lockhart pleaded guilty to the possession offense and the Government dismissed the receipt offense.

Lockhart's presentence report calculated a guidelines range of 78 to 97 months for the possession offense. But the report also concluded that Lockhart was subject to [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#)'s mandatory minimum because his prior New York abuse conviction related “to aggravated sexual abuse, sexual abuse, or abusive sexual conduct involving a minor or ward.” PSR ¶¶ 87–88.

Lockhart objected, arguing that the statutory phrase “involving a minor or ward” applies to all three listed crimes: “aggravated sexual abuse,” “sexual abuse,” *and* “abusive sexual conduct.” He therefore contended that his prior conviction for sexual abuse involving an *adult* fell outside the enhancement's ambit. The District Court rejected Lockhart's argument and applied the mandatory minimum. The Second Circuit affirmed his sentence. [749 F.3d 148 \(C.A.2 2014\)](#).

II

[Section 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#) reads in full:

“Whoever violates, or attempts or conspires to violate [[18 U.S.C. § 2252\(a\)\(4\)](#)] shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than 10 years, or both, but ... if such person has a prior conviction under this chapter, chapter 71, chapter 109A, or chapter 117, or under section 920 of title 10 ([article 120 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice](#)), or under the laws of any State relating to aggravated sexual abuse, sexual abuse, or abusive sexual conduct involving a minor or ward, or the production, possession, receipt, mailing, sale, distribution, shipment, or transportation of child pornography, such person shall be fined under this title and imprisoned for not less than 10 years nor more than 20 years.”

This case concerns that provision's list of state sexual-abuse offenses. The issue before us is whether the limiting phrase that appears at the end of that list—“involving a minor or ward”—applies to all three predicate crimes preceding it in the list or only the final predicate crime. We hold that “involving a minor or ward” modifies only “abusive sexual

conduct,” the antecedent immediately preceding it. Although [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#)'s list of state predicates is awkwardly phrased (to put it charitably), the provision's text and context together reveal a straightforward reading. A timeworn textual canon is confirmed by the structure and internal logic of the statutory scheme.

A

Consider the text. When this Court has interpreted statutes that include a list of terms or phrases followed by a limiting clause, we have typically applied an interpretive strategy called the “rule of the last antecedent.” See [Barnhart v. Thomas](#), 540 U.S. 20, 26, 124 S.Ct. 376, 157 L.Ed.2d 333 (2003). The rule provides that “a limiting clause or phrase ... should ordinarily be read as modifying only the noun or phrase that it immediately follows.” *Ibid.*; see also Black's Law Dictionary 1532–1533 (10th ed. 2014) (“[Q]ualifying words or phrases modify the words or phrases immediately preceding them and not words or phrases more remote, unless the extension is necessary from the context or the spirit of the entire *963 writing”); A. Scalia & B. Garner, *Reading Law: The Interpretation of Legal Texts* 144 (2012).

This Court has applied the rule from our earliest decisions to our more recent. See, e.g., [Sims Lessee v. Irvine](#), 3 Dall. 425, 444, n. 1 L.Ed. 665 (1799); [FTC v. Mandel Brothers, Inc.](#), 359 U.S. 385, 389, n. 4, 79 S.Ct. 818, 3 L.Ed.2d 893 (1959); [Barnhart](#), 540 U.S., at 26, 124 S.Ct. 376. The rule reflects the basic intuition that when a modifier appears at the end of a list, it is easier to apply that modifier only to the item directly before it. That is particularly true where it takes more than a little mental energy to process the individual entries in the list, making it a heavy lift to carry the modifier across them all. For example, imagine you are the general manager of the Yankees and you are rounding out your 2016 roster. You tell your scouts to find a defensive catcher, a quick-footed shortstop, or a pitcher from last year's World Champion Kansas City Royals. It would be natural for your scouts to confine their search for a pitcher to last year's championship team, but to look more broadly for catchers and shortstops.

Applied here, the last antecedent principle suggests that the phrase “involving a minor or ward” modifies only the phrase that it immediately follows: “abusive sexual conduct.” As a corollary, it also suggests that the phrases “aggravated sexual abuse” and “sexual abuse” are not so constrained.

Of course, as with any canon of statutory interpretation, the rule of the last antecedent “is not an absolute and can assuredly be overcome by other indicia of meaning.” [Barnhart](#), 540 U.S., at 26, 124 S.Ct. 376; see also [Davis v. Michigan Dept. of Treasury](#), 489 U.S. 803, 809, 109 S.Ct. 1500, 103 L.Ed.2d 891 (1989) (“It is a fundamental canon of statutory construction that the words of a statute must be read in their context and with a view to their place in the overall statutory scheme”). For instance, take “‘the laws, the treaties, and the constitution of the United States.’” *Post*, at 964, n. 1 (KAGAN, J., dissenting). A reader intuitively applies “of the United States” to “the laws,” “the treaties” and “the constitution” because (among other things) laws, treaties, and the constitution are often cited together, because readers are used to seeing “of the United States” modify each of them, and because the listed items are simple and parallel without unexpected internal modifiers or structure. [Section 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#), by contrast, does not contain items that readers are used to seeing listed together or a concluding modifier that readers are accustomed to applying to each of them. And the varied syntax of each item in the list makes it hard for the reader to carry the final modifying clause across all three.

More importantly, here the interpretation urged by the rule of the last antecedent is not overcome by other indicia of meaning. To the contrary, [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#)'s context fortifies the meaning that principle commands.

B

Our inquiry into [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#)'s context begins with the internal logic of that provision. [Section 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#) establishes sentencing minimums and maximums for three categories of offenders. The first third of the section imposes a 10–year maximum sentence on offenders with no prior convictions. The second third imposes a 10–year minimum and 20–year maximum on offenders who have previously violated a federal offense listed within various chapters of the Federal Criminal Code. And the last third imposes the same minimum and maximum on offenders who have previously committed state “sexual *964 abuse, aggravated sexual abuse, or abusive sexual conduct involving a minor or ward” as well as a number of state crimes related to the possession and distribution of child pornography.

Among the chapters of the Federal Criminal Code that can trigger [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#)'s recidivist enhancement are crimes “under ... chapter 109A.” Chapter 109A criminalizes a range of sexual-abuse offenses involving adults *or* minors and wards.¹ And it places those federal sexual-abuse crimes under headings that use language nearly identical to the language [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#) uses to enumerate the three categories of state sexual-abuse predicates. The first section in Chapter 109A is titled “Aggravated sexual abuse.” [18 U.S.C. § 2241](#). The second is titled “Sexual abuse.” § 2242. And the third is titled “Sexual abuse of a minor or ward.” § 2243. Applying the rule of the last antecedent, those sections mirror precisely the order, precisely the divisions, and nearly precisely the words used to describe the three state sexual-abuse predicate crimes in [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#): “aggravated sexual abuse,” “sexual abuse,” and “abusive sexual conduct involving a minor or ward.”

¹ For example, [§ 2241\(a\)](#) of Chapter 109A prohibits forced sexual acts against “another person”—not just a person under a certain age. [Section 2241\(c\)](#) specially criminalizes sexual acts “with another person who has not attained the age of 12 years,” and [§ 2243\(b\)](#) does the same for sexual acts with wards who are “in official detention” or “under the custodial, supervisory, or disciplinary authority of the person so engaging.”

This similarity appears to be more than a coincidence. We cannot state with certainty that Congress used Chapter 109A as a template for the list of state predicates set out in [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#), but we cannot ignore the parallel, particularly because the headings in Chapter 109A were in place when Congress amended the statute to add [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#)'s state sexual-abuse predicates.²

² See [18 U.S.C. § 2241 \(1994 ed.\)](#) (“Aggravated sexual abuse”); § 2242 (“Sexual abuse”); § 2243 (“Sexual abuse of a minor or ward”).

If Congress had intended to limit each of the state predicates to conduct “involving a minor or ward,” we doubt it would have followed, or thought it needed to follow, so closely the structure and language of Chapter 109A.³ The conclusion that Congress followed the federal template is supported by the fact that Congress did nothing to indicate that offenders with prior federal sexual-abuse convictions are more culpable, harmful, or worthy of enhanced punishment than offenders with nearly identical state priors. We therefore see no reason to interpret [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#) so that “[s]exual abuse” that occurs in the Second Circuit courthouse triggers the sentence enhancement, but “sexual abuse” that occurs next door in the Manhattan municipal building does not.

³ The dissent points out that [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\) \(2012 ed.\)](#) did not also borrow from the heading of the fourth section in Chapter 109A (or, we note, from the fifth, sixth, seventh, or eighth sections) in defining its categories of state sexual-abuse predicates. *Post*, at 968 – 969 (KAGAN, J. dissenting). But the significance of the similarity between the three state predicates in [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#) and the wording, structure, and order of the first three sections of Chapter 109A is not diminished by the fact that Congress stopped there (especially when the remaining sections largely set out derivations from, definitions of, and penalties for the first three). See, e.g., § 2244 (listing offenses derived from [§§ 2241, 2242, and 2243](#)); § 2245 (creating an enhancement for offenses under Chapter 109A resulting in death); § 2246 (listing definitions).

III

A

Lockhart argues, to the contrary, that the phrase “involving a minor or ward” *965 should be interpreted to modify all three state sexual-abuse predicates. He first contends, as does our dissenting colleague, that the so-called series-qualifier principle supports his reading. This

principle, Lockhart says, requires a modifier to apply to all items in a series when such an application would represent a natural construction. Brief for Petitioner 12; *post*, at 970.

This Court has long acknowledged that structural or contextual evidence may “rebut the last antecedent inference.” [Jama v. Immigration and Customs Enforcement](#), 543 U.S. 335, 344, n. 4, 125 S.Ct. 694, 160 L.Ed.2d 708 (2005). For instance, in [Porto Rico Railway, Light & Power Co. v. Mor](#), 253 U.S. 345, 40 S.Ct. 516, 64 L.Ed. 944 (1920), on which Lockhart relies, this Court declined to apply the rule of the last antecedent where “[n]o reason appears why” a modifying clause is not “applicable as much to the first and other words as to the last” and where “special reasons exist for so construing the clause in question.” *Id.*, at 348, 40 S.Ct. 516. In [United States v. Bass](#), 404 U.S. 336, 92 S.Ct. 515, 30 L.Ed.2d 488 (1971), this Court declined to apply the rule of the last antecedent where “there is no reason consistent with any discernable purpose of the statute to apply” the limiting phrase to the last antecedent alone. *Id.*, at 341, 92 S.Ct. 515. Likewise, in *Jama*, the Court suggested that the rule would not be appropriate where the “modifying clause appear[s] ... at the end of a single, integrated list.” 543 U.S., at 344, n. 4, 125 S.Ct. 694. And, most recently, in [Paroline v. United States](#), 572 U.S. ———, 134 S.Ct. 1710, 188 L.Ed.2d 714 (2014), the Court noted that the rule need not be applied “in a mechanical way where it would require accepting ‘unlikely premises.’” *Id.*, at ———, 134 S.Ct., at 1721.

But in none of those cases did the Court describe, much less apply, a countervailing grammatical mandate that could bear the weight that either Lockhart or the dissent places on the series qualifier principle. Instead, the Court simply observed that sometimes context weighs against the application of the rule of the last antecedent. [Barnhart](#), 540 U.S., at 26, 124 S.Ct. 376. Whether a modifier is “applicable as much to the first ... as to the last” words in a list, whether a set of items form a “single, integrated list,” and whether the application of the rule would require acceptance of an “unlikely premise” are fundamentally contextual questions.

Lockhart attempts to identify contextual indicia that he says rebut the rule of the last antecedent, but those indicia hurt rather than help his prospects. He points out that the final two state predicates, “sexual abuse” and “abusive sexual conduct,” are “nearly synonymous as a matter of everyday speech.” Brief for Petitioner 17. And, of course, anyone who commits “aggravated sexual abuse” has also necessarily committed “sexual abuse.” So, he posits, the items in the list are sufficiently similar that a limiting phrase could apply equally to all three of them.

But Lockhart's effort to demonstrate some similarity among the items in the list of state predicates reveals far too much similarity. The three state predicate crimes are not just related on Lockhart's reading; they are hopelessly redundant. Any conduct that would qualify as “aggravated sexual abuse ... involving a minor or ward” or “sexual abuse ... involving a minor or ward” would also qualify as “abusive sexual conduct involving a minor or ward.” We take no position today on the meaning of the terms “aggravated sexual abuse,” “sexual abuse,” and “abusive sexual conduct,” including their similarities and differences. But it is clear that applying § 966 the limiting phrase to all three items would risk running headlong into the rule against superfluity by transforming a list of separate predicates into a set of synonyms describing the same predicate. See [Bailey v. United States](#), 516 U.S. 137, 146, 116 S.Ct. 501, 133 L.Ed.2d 472 (1995) (“We assume that Congress used two terms because it intended each term to have a particular, nonsuperfluous meaning”).

Applying the limiting phrase “involving a minor or ward” more sparingly, by contrast, preserves some distinction between the categories of state predicates by limiting only the third category to conduct “involving a minor or ward.” We recognize that this interpretation does not eliminate all superfluity between “aggravated sexual abuse” and “sexual abuse.” See [United States v. Atlantic Research Corp.](#), 551 U.S. 128, 137, 127 S.Ct. 2331, 168 L.Ed.2d 28 (2007) (“[O]ur hesitancy to construe statutes to render language superfluous does not require us to avoid surplusage at all costs. It is appropriate to tolerate a degree of surplusage”). But there is a ready explanation for the redundancy that remains: It follows the categories in Chapter 109A's federal template. See *supra*, at 964. We see no similar explanation for Lockhart's complete collapse of the list.

The dissent offers a suggestion rooted in its impressions about how people ordinarily speak and write. *Post*, at 969 – 971. The problem is that, as even the dissent acknowledges, § 2252(b)(2)'s list of state predicates is hardly intuitive. No one would mistake its odd repetition and inelegant phrasing for a reflection of the accumulated wisdom of everyday speech patterns. It would be as

if a friend asked you to get her tart lemons, sour lemons, or sour fruit from Mexico. If you brought back lemons from California, but your friend insisted that she was using customary speech and obviously asked for Mexican fruit only, you would be forgiven for disagreeing on both counts.

Faced with [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#)'s inartful drafting, then, do we interpret the provision by viewing it as a clear, commonsense list best construed as if conversational English? Or do we look around to see if there might be some provenance to its peculiarity? With Chapter 109A so readily at hand, we are unpersuaded by our dissenting colleague's invocation of basic examples from day-to-day life. Whatever the validity of the dissent's broader point, this simply is not a case in which colloquial practice is of much use. [Section 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#)'s list is hardly the way an average person, or even an average lawyer, would set about to describe the relevant conduct if they had started from scratch.

B

Lockhart next takes aim at our construction of [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#) to avoid disparity between the state and federal sexual-abuse predicates. He contends that other disparities between state and federal predicates in [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#) indicate that parity was not Congress' concern. For example, [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#) imposes the recidivist enhancement on offenders with prior federal convictions under Chapter 71 of Title 18, which governs obscenity. See §§ 1461–1470. Yet [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#) does not impose a similar enhancement for offenses under state obscenity laws. Similarly, [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#)'s neighbor provision, [§ 2252\(b\)\(1\)](#), creates a mandatory minimum for sex trafficking involving children, but not sex trafficking involving adults.

However, our construction of [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#)'s sexual-abuse predicates does not rely on a general assumption that Congress sought full parity between all of the federal and state predicates in [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#). It relies instead on contextual cues particular to the sexual-abuse predicates. To enumerate the state sexual-abuse predicates, Congress used language similar to that in Chapter 109A of the Federal Criminal Code, which describes crimes involving both adults and children. See *supra*, at 964. We therefore assume that the same language used to describe the state sexual-abuse predicates also describes conduct involving both adults and children.

C

Lockhart, joined by the dissent, see *post*, at 973 – 974, next says that the provision's legislative history supports the view that Congress deliberately structured [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#) to treat state and federal predicates differently. They rely on two sources. The first is a reference in a Report from the Senate Judiciary Committee on the Child Pornography Prevention Act of 1996, 110 Stat. 3009–26. That Act was the first to add the language at issue here—“aggravated sexual abuse, sexual abuse, or abusive sexual conduct involving a minor or ward”—to the U.S. Code. (It was initially added to [§ 2252\(b\)\(1\)](#), then added two years later to [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#)).

The Report noted that the enhancement applies to persons with prior convictions “under any State child abuse law or law relating to the production, receipt or distribution of child pornography.” See [S.Rep. No. 104–358, p. 9](#) (1996). But that reference incompletely describes the state pornography production and distribution predicates, which cover not only “production, receipt, or distributing of child pornography,” as the Report indicates, but also “production, possession, receipt, mailing, sale, distribution, shipment, or transportation of child pornography,” [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#). For the reasons discussed, we have no trouble concluding that the Report also incompletely describes the state sexual-abuse predicates.

Lockhart and the dissent also rely on a letter sent from the Department of Justice (DOJ) to the House of Representative's Committee on the Judiciary commenting on the proposed “Child Protection and Sexual Predator Punishment Act of 1998.” [H.R.Rep. No. 105–557, pp. 26–34](#) (1998). In the letter, DOJ provides commentary on the then-present state of [§§ 2252\(b\)\(1\)](#) and [2252\(b\)\(2\)](#), noting that although there is a “5–year mandatory minimum sentence for individuals charged with receipt or distribution of child pornography and who have prior state convictions for child molestation” pursuant to [§ 2252\(b\)\(1\)](#), there is “no enhanced provision for those individuals

charged with possession of child pornography who have prior convictions for child abuse” pursuant to [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#). *Id.*, at 31. That letter, they say, demonstrates that DOJ understood the language at issue here to impose a sentencing enhancement only for prior state convictions involving children.

We doubt that DOJ was trying to describe the full reach of the language in [§ 2252\(b\)\(1\)](#), as the dissent suggests. To the contrary, there are several clues that the letter was relying on just one of the provision's many salient features. For instance, the letter's references to “child molestation” and “child abuse” do not encompass a large number of state crimes that are unambiguously covered by “abusive sexual conduct involving a minor or ward”—namely, crimes involving “wards.” Wards can be minors, but they can also be adults. See, e.g., [§ 2243\(b\)](#) (defining “wards” as persons who are “in official detention” and “under ... custodial, supervisory, or disciplinary authority”). Moreover, we doubt that DOJ intended to express a belief that the potentially broad scope of serious crimes encompassed by *968 “aggravated sexual abuse, sexual abuse, and abusive sexual conduct” reaches no further than state crimes that would traditionally be characterized as “child molestation” or “child abuse.”

Thus, Congress' amendment to the provision did give “DOJ just what it wanted,” *post*, at 973. But the amendment also did more than that. We therefore think it unnecessary to restrict our interpretation of the provision to the parts of it that DOJ chose to highlight in its letter. Just as importantly, the terse descriptions of the provision in the Senate Report and DOJ letter do nothing to explain *why* Congress would have wanted to apply the mandatory minimum to individuals convicted in federal court of sexual abuse or aggravated sexual abuse involving an adult, but not to individuals convicted in state court of the same. The legislative history, in short, “hardly speaks with [a] clarity of purpose” through which we can discern Congress' statutory objective. [Universal Camera Corp. v. NLRB](#), 340 U.S. 474, 483, 71 S.Ct. 456, 95 L.Ed. 456 (1951).

The best explanation Lockhart can muster is a basic administrability concern: Congress “knew what conduct it was capturing under federal law and could be confident that all covered federal offenses were proper predicates. But Congress did not have the same familiarity with the varied and mutable sexual-abuse laws of all fifty states.” Brief for Petitioner 27. Perhaps Congress worried that state laws punishing relatively minor offenses like public lewdness or indecent exposure involving an adult would be swept into [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#). *Id.*, at 28. But the risk Lockhart identifies is minimal. Whether the terms in [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#) are given their “generic” meaning, see [Descamps v. United States](#), 570 U.S. ———, 133 S.Ct. 2276, 186 L.Ed.2d 438 (2013); [Taylor v. United States](#), 495 U.S. 575, 110 S.Ct. 2143, 109 L.Ed.2d 607 (1990), or are defined in light of their federal counterparts—which we do not decide—they are unlikely to sweep in the bizarre or unexpected state offenses that worry Lockhart.

D

Finally, Lockhart asks us to apply the rule of lenity. We have used the lenity principle to resolve ambiguity in favor of the defendant only “at the end of the process of construing what Congress has expressed” when the ordinary canons of statutory construction have revealed no satisfactory construction. [Callanan v. United States](#), 364 U.S. 587, 596, 81 S.Ct. 321, 5 L.Ed.2d 312 (1961). That is not the case here. To be sure, Lockhart contends that if we applied a different principle of statutory construction—namely, his “series-qualifier principle”—we would arrive at an alternative construction of [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#). But the arguable availability of multiple, divergent principles of statutory construction cannot automatically trigger the rule of lenity. Cf. Llewellyn, Remarks on the Theory of Appellate Decision and the Rules or Canons About How Statutes Are To Be Construed, 3 Vand. L. Rev. 395, 401 (1950) (“[T]here are two opposing canons on almost every point”). Here, the rule of the last antecedent is well supported by context and Lockhart's alternative is not. We will not apply the rule of lenity to override a sensible grammatical principle buttressed by the statute's text and structure.

* * *

We conclude that the text and structure of [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#) confirm that the provision applies to prior state convictions for “sexual abuse” and “aggravated sexual abuse,” whether or not the convictions involved a minor or ward. We therefore hold that Lockhart's prior conviction for sexual abuse of an adult is encompassed by *969 [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#). The judgment of the Court of Appeals, accordingly, is affirmed.

So ordered.

Justice [KAGAN](#), with whom Justice [BREYER](#) joins, dissenting.

Imagine a friend told you that she hoped to meet “an actor, director, or producer involved with the new Star Wars movie.” You would know immediately that she wanted to meet an actor from the Star Wars cast—not an actor in, for example, the latest Zoolander. Suppose a real estate agent promised to find a client “a house, condo, or apartment in New York.” Wouldn't the potential buyer be annoyed if the agent sent him information about condos in Maryland or California? And consider a law imposing a penalty for the “violation of any statute, rule, or regulation relating to insider trading.” Surely a person would have cause to protest if punished under that provision for violating a traffic statute. The reason in all three cases is the same: Everyone understands that the modifying phrase—“involved with the new Star Wars movie,” “in New York,” “relating to insider trading”—applies to each term in the preceding list, not just the last.

That ordinary understanding of how English works, in speech and writing alike, should decide this case. Avondale Lockhart is subject to a 10–year mandatory minimum sentence for possessing child pornography if, but only if, he has a prior state-law conviction for “aggravated sexual abuse, sexual abuse, or abusive sexual conduct involving a minor or ward.” [18 U.S.C. § 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#). The Court today, relying on what is called the “rule of the last antecedent,” reads the phrase “involving a minor or ward” as modifying only the final term in that three-item list. But properly read, the modifier applies to each of the terms—just as in the examples above. That normal construction finds support in uncommonly clear-cut legislative history, which states in so many words that the three predicate crimes all involve abuse of children. And if any doubt remained, the rule of lenity would command the same result: Lockhart's prior conviction for sexual abuse *of an adult* does not trigger [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#)'s mandatory minimum penalty. I respectfully dissent.

I

Begin where the majority does—with the rule of the last antecedent. See *ante*, at 962. This Court most fully discussed that principle in [Barnhart v. Thomas](#), 540 U.S. 20, 124 S.Ct. 376, 157 L.Ed.2d 333 (2003), which considered a statute providing that an individual qualifies as disabled if “he is not only unable to do his previous work but cannot, considering his age, education, and work experience, engage in any other kind of substantial gainful work *which exists in the national economy.*” *Id.*, at 21–22, 124 S.Ct. 376 (quoting [42 U.S.C. § 423\(d\)\(2\)\(A\)](#)) (emphasis added). The Court held, invoking the last-antecedent rule, that the italicized phrase modifies only the term “substantial gainful work,” and not the term “previous work” occurring earlier in the sentence. Two points are of especial note. First, *Barnhart* contained a significant caveat: The last-antecedent rule “can assuredly be overcome by other indicia of meaning.” [540 U.S.](#), at 26, 124 S.Ct. 376; see, e.g., [Nobelman v. American Savings Bank](#), 508 U.S. 324, 330–331, 113 S.Ct. 2106, 124 L.Ed.2d 228 (1993) (refusing to apply the rule when a contrary interpretation was “the more reasonable one”). Second, the grammatical structure of the provision in *Barnhart* is nothing like that of the statute in this case: The modifying phrase does not, as here, immediately follow a list of multiple, parallel terms. That is true as well in the other *970 instances in which this Court has followed the rule. See, e.g., [Jama v. Immigration and Customs Enforcement](#), 543 U.S. 335, 125 S.Ct. 694, 160 L.Ed.2d 708 (2005); [Batchelor v. United States](#), 156 U.S. 426, 15 S.Ct. 446, 39 L.Ed. 478 (1895); [Sims Lessee v. Irvine](#), 3 Dall. 425, 1 L.Ed. 665 (1799).

Indeed, this Court has made clear that the last-antecedent rule does not generally apply to the grammatical construction present here: when “[t]he modifying clause appear[s] ... at the end of

a single, integrated list.” [Jama, 543 U.S., at 344, n. 4, 125 S.Ct. 694](#). Then, the exact opposite is usually true: As in the examples beginning this opinion, the modifying phrase refers alike to each of the list's terms. A leading treatise puts the point as follows: “When there is a straightforward, parallel construction that involves all nouns or verbs in a series,” a modifier at the end of the list “normally applies to the entire series.” A. Scalia & B. Garner, *Reading Law: The Interpretation of Legal Texts* 147 (2012); compare *id.*, at 152 (“When the syntax involves something other than [such] a parallel series of nouns or verbs,” the modifier “normally applies only to the nearest reasonable referent”). That interpretive practice of applying the modifier to the whole list boasts a fancy name—the “series-qualifier canon,” see *Black’s Law Dictionary* 1574 (10th ed. 2014)—but, as my opening examples show, it reflects the completely ordinary way that people speak and listen, write and read.¹

¹

The majority's baseball example, see *ante*, at 963, reads the other way only because its three terms are *not* parallel. The words “catcher” and “shortstop,” but not “pitcher,” are qualified separate and apart from the modifying clause at the end of the sentence: “Pitcher” thus calls for a modifier of its own, and the phrase “from the Kansas City Royals” answers that call. Imagine the sentence is slightly reworded to refer to a “defensive catcher, quick-footed shortstop, or hard-throwing pitcher from the Kansas City Royals.” Or, alternatively, suppose the sentence referred simply to a “catcher, shortstop, or pitcher from the Kansas City Royals.” Either way, all three players must come from the Royals—because the three terms (unlike in the majority's sentence) are a parallel series with a modifying clause at the end.

Even the exception to the series-qualifier principle is intuitive, emphasizing both its common-sensical basis and its customary usage. When the nouns in a list are so disparate that the modifying clause does not make sense when applied to them all, then the last-antecedent rule takes over. Suppose your friend told you not that she wants to meet “an actor, director, or producer involved with Star Wars,” but instead that she hopes someday to meet “a President, Supreme Court Justice, or actor involved with Star Wars.” Presumably, you would know that she wants to meet a President or Justice even if that person has no connection to the famed film franchise. But so long as the modifying clause “is applicable as much to the first and other words as to the last,” this Court has stated, “the natural construction of the language demands that the clause be read as applicable to all.” [Paroline v. United States, 572 U.S. _____, _____, 134 S.Ct. 1710, 1721, 188 L.Ed.2d 714 \(2014\)](#) (quoting [Porto Rico Railway, Light & Power Co. v. Mor, 253 U.S. 345, 348, 40 S.Ct. 516, 64 L.Ed. 944 \(1920\)](#)). In other words, the modifier then qualifies not just the last antecedent but the whole series.

As the majority itself must acknowledge, see *ante*, at 964 – 965, this Court has repeatedly applied the series-qualifier rule in just that manner. In *Paroline*, for example, this Court considered a statute requiring possessors of child pornography to pay restitution to the individuals whose abuse is recorded in those materials. The law defines such a victim's losses to include *971 “medical services relating to physical, psychiatric, or psychological care; physical and occupational therapy or rehabilitation; necessary transportation, temporary housing, and child care expenses; lost income; attorneys' fees, as well as other costs incurred; and any other losses suffered by the victim as a proximate result of the offense.” [18 U.S.C. §§ 2259\(b\)\(3\)\(A\)-\(F\)](#) (lettering omitted). The victim bringing the lawsuit invoked the last-antecedent rule to argue that the modifier at the end of the provision—“as a proximate result of the offense”—pertained only to the last item in the preceding list, and not to any of the others. See [572 U.S., at _____, 134 S.Ct., at 1721](#). But the Court rejected that view: It recited the “canon[] of statutory construction,” derived from the “natural” use of language, that “[w]hen several words are followed by a clause” that can sensibly modify them all, it should be understood to do so. *Ibid.* Thus, the Court read the proximate-cause requirement to cover each and every term in the list.

[United States v. Bass, 404 U.S. 336, 92 S.Ct. 515, 30 L.Ed.2d 488 \(1971\)](#), to take just one other example, followed the same rule. There, the Court confronted a statute making it a crime for a convicted felon to “receive [], possess [], or transport [] in commerce or affecting commerce ... any firearm.” [18 U.S.C.App. § 1202\(a\) \(1970 ed.\)](#) (current version at [18 U.S.C. § 922\(g\)](#)). The Government contended that the modifying clause—“in commerce or affecting commerce”—applied only to “transport” and not to “receive” or “possess.” But the Court rebuffed that argument. “[T]he natural construction of the language,” the Court recognized, “suggests that the clause ‘in commerce or affecting commerce’ qualifies all three antecedents in the list.” [404 U.S., at 339, 92 S.Ct. 515](#) (some internal quotation marks omitted). Relying on longstanding precedents endorsing such a construction, the Court explained: “Since ‘in commerce or affecting commerce’ undeniably applies to at least one antecedent, and since it makes sense with all three, the more plausible construction here is that it in fact applies to all three.” *Id.*, at 339–340, [92 S.Ct. 515](#) (citing [United States v.](#)

[Standard Brewery, Inc.](#), 251 U.S. 210, 218, 40 S.Ct. 139, 64 L.Ed. 229 (1920); [Porto Rico Railway](#), 253 U.S., at 348, 40 S.Ct. 516); see also, e.g., [Jones v. United States](#), 529 U.S. 848, 853, 120 S.Ct. 1904, 146 L.Ed.2d 902 (2000) (similarly treating the interstate commerce element in the phrase “any building, vehicle, or other real or personal property used in interstate or foreign commerce” as applying to buildings and vehicles).

That analysis holds equally for [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#), the sentencing provision at issue here. The relevant language—“aggravated sexual abuse, sexual abuse, or abusive sexual conduct involving a minor or ward”—contains a “single, integrated list” of parallel terms (*i.e.*, sex crimes) followed by a modifying clause. [Jama](#), 543 U.S., at 344, n. 4, 125 S.Ct. 694. Given the close relation among the terms in the series, the modifier makes sense “as much to the first and other words as to the last.” [Paroline](#), 572 U.S., at ———, 134 S.Ct., at 1721. In other words, the reference to a minor or ward applies as well to sexual abuse and aggravated sexual abuse as to abusive sexual conduct. (The case would be different if, for example, the statute established a mandatory minimum for any person previously convicted of “arson, receipt of stolen property, or abusive sexual conduct involving a minor or ward.”) So interpreting the modifier “as applicable to all” the preceding terms is what “the natural construction of the language” requires. *Ibid.*; [Bass](#), 404 U.S., at 339, 92 S.Ct. 515.

The majority responds to all this by claiming that the “inelegant phrasing” of *972 [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#) renders it somehow exempt from a grammatical rule reflecting “how people ordinarily” use the English language. *Ante*, at 966. But to begin with, the majority is wrong to suggest that the series-qualifier canon is only about “colloquial” or “conversational” English. *Ibid.* In fact, it applies to both speech and writing, in both their informal and their formal varieties. Here is a way to test my point: Pick up a journal, or a book, or for that matter a Supreme Court opinion—most of which keep “everyday” colloquialisms at a far distance. *Ibid.* You’ll come across many sentences having the structure of the statutory provision at issue here: a few nouns followed by a modifying clause. And you’ll discover, again and yet again, that the clause modifies every noun in the series, not just the last—in other words, that even (especially?) in formal writing, the series-qualifier principle works.² And the majority is wrong too in suggesting that the “odd repetition” in [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#)’s list of state predicates causes the series-qualifier principle to lose its force. *Ibid.* The majority’s own made-up sentence proves that much. If a friend asked you “to get her tart lemons, sour lemons, or sour fruit from Mexico,” you might well think her list of terms perplexing: You might puzzle over the difference between tart and sour lemons, and wonder why she had specifically mentioned lemons when she apparently would be happy with sour fruit of any kind. But of one thing, you would have no doubt: Your friend wants some produce *from Mexico*; it would not do to get her, say, sour lemons from Vietnam. However weird the way she listed fruits—or the way [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#) lists offenses—the modifying clause still refers to them all.

²

Too busy to carry out this homework assignment? Consider some examples (there are many more) from just the last few months of this Court’s work. In [OB Personverkehr AG v. Sachs](#), 577 U.S. ———, ———, 136 S.Ct. 390, 395, 193 L.Ed.2d 269 (2015), this Court described a lawsuit as alleging “wrongful arrest, imprisonment, and torture by Saudi police.” In [James v. Boise](#), 577 U.S. ———, ———, 136 S.Ct. 685, 686–687, ——— L.Ed.2d ——— (2016) (*per curiam*) (quoting [Martin v. Hunter’s Lessee](#), 1 Wheat. 304, 348, 4 L.Ed. 97 (1816)), this Court affirmed that state courts must follow its interpretations of “the laws, the treaties, and the constitution of the United States.” In [Musacchio v. United States](#), 577 U.S. ———, ———, 136 S.Ct. 709, 715, ——— L.Ed.2d ——— (2016) (quoting [Reed Elsevier, Inc. v. Muchnick](#), 559 U.S. 154, 166, 130 S.Ct. 1237, 176 L.Ed.2d 18 (2010)), this Court noted that in interpreting statutes it looks to the “text, context, and relevant historical treatment of the provision at issue.” In [FERC v. Electric Power Supply Assn.](#), 577 U.S. ———, ———, 136 S.Ct. 760, 774, ——— L.Ed.2d ——— (2016), this Court applied a statute addressing “any rule, regulation, practice, or contract affecting [a wholesale] rate [or] charge.” And in [Montanile v. Board of Trustees of Nat. Elevator Industry Health Benefit Plan](#), 577 U.S. ———, ———, 136 S.Ct. 651, 655, ——— L.Ed.2d ——— (2016), this Court interpreted an employee benefits plan requiring reimbursement “for attorneys’ fees, costs, expenses or damages claimed by the covered person.” In each case, of course, the italicized modifying clause refers to every item in the preceding list. That is because the series-qualifier rule reflects how all of us use language, in writing and in speech, in formal and informal contexts, all the time.

The majority as well seeks refuge in the idea that applying the series-qualifier canon to [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#) would violate the rule against superfluity. See *ante*, at 965 – 966. Says the majority: “Any conduct that would qualify as ‘aggravated sexual abuse ... involving a minor or ward’ or ‘sexual abuse ... involving a minor or ward’ would also qualify as ‘abusive sexual conduct involving a minor or ward.’” *Ante*, at 965. But that rejoinder doesn’t work. “[T]he canon against superfluity,” this Court has often stated, “assists only where a competing interpretation gives effect to every clause and word of a statute.” [Microsoft *973 Corp. v. i4i Ltd. Partnership](#), 564 U.S. 91, 106, 131 S.Ct. 2238, 180 L.Ed.2d 131 (2011) (internal quotation marks omitted); see, e.g., [Bruesewitz v. Wyeth LLC](#), 562 U.S. 223, 236, 131 S.Ct. 1068, 179 L.Ed.2d 1 (2011). And the majority’s approach

(as it admits, see *ante*, at 965) produces superfluity too—and in equal measure. Now (to rearrange the majority's sentence) any conduct that would qualify as “abusive sexual conduct involving a minor or ward” or “aggravated sexual abuse” would also qualify as “sexual abuse.” In other words, on the majority's reading as well, two listed crimes become subsets of a third, so that the three could have been written as one. And indeed, the majority's superfluity has an especially odd quality, because it relates to the modifying clause itself: The majority, that is, makes the term “involving a minor or ward” wholly unnecessary. Remember the old adage about the pot and the kettle? That is why the rule against superfluity cannot excuse the majority from reading [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#)'s modifier, as ordinary usage demands, to pertain to all the terms in the preceding series.³

³ The majority asserts that it has found, concealed within [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#)'s structure, an “explanation” for its own superfluity, *ante*, at 965, but that claim, as I'll soon show, collapses on further examination. See *infra*, at 975 – 977.

II

Legislative history confirms what the natural construction of language shows: Each of the three predicate offenses at issue here must involve a minor. The list of those crimes appears in two places in [§ 2252\(b\)](#)—both in [§ 2252\(b\)\(1\)](#), which contains a sentencing enhancement for those convicted of distributing or receiving child pornography, and in [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#), which includes a similar enhancement for those (like Lockhart) convicted of possessing such material. Descriptions of that list of offenses, made at the time Congress added it to those provisions, belie the majority's position.

The relevant language—again, providing for a mandatory minimum sentence if a person has a prior state-law conviction for “aggravated sexual abuse, sexual abuse, or abusive sexual conduct involving a minor or ward”—first made its appearance in 1996, when Congress inserted it into [§ 2252\(b\)\(1\)](#). See Child Pornography Prevention Act of 1996, § 121(5), 110 Stat. 3009–30, [18 U.S.C. § 2251](#) note. At that time, the Senate Report on the legislation explained what the new language meant: The mandatory minimum would apply to an “offender with a prior conviction under ... any *State child abuse law*.” [S.Rep. No. 104–358, p. 9](#) (1996) (emphasis added). It is hard to imagine saying any more directly that the just-added state sexual-abuse predicates all involve minors, and minors only.⁴

⁴ And it makes no difference that the Senate Report accompanied [§ 2252\(b\)\(1\)](#)'s, rather than [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#)'s, amendment. No one can possibly think (and the majority therefore does not try to argue) that the disputed language means something different in [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#) than in its neighbor and model, [§ 2252\(b\)\(1\)](#).

Two years later, in urging Congress to include the same predicate offenses in [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#), the Department of Justice (DOJ) itself read the list that way. In a formal bill comment, DOJ noted that proposed legislation on child pornography failed to fix a statutory oddity: Only [§ 2252\(b\)\(1\)](#), and not [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#), then contained the state predicates at issue here. DOJ described that discrepancy as follows: Whereas [§ 2252\(b\)\(1\)](#) provided a penalty enhancement for “individuals charged with receipt or distribution of *974 child pornography *and who have prior state convictions for child molestation*,” the adjacent [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#) contained no such enhancement for those “charged with possession of child pornography *who have prior convictions for child abuse*.” [H.R.Rep. No. 105–557, p. 31](#) (1998) (emphasis added). That should change, DOJ wrote: A possessor of child pornography should also be subject to a 2–year mandatory minimum if he had “a *prior conviction for sexual abuse of a minor*.” *Ibid.* (emphasis added). DOJ thus made clear that the predicate offenses it recommended adding to [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#)—like those already in [§ 2252\(b\)\(1\)](#)—related not to all sexual abuse but only to sexual abuse of children. And Congress gave DOJ just what it wanted: Soon after receiving the letter, Congress added the language at issue to [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#), resulting in the requested 2–year minimum sentence. See Protection of Children From Sexual Predators Act of 1998, § 202(a)(2), 112 Stat. 2977, [18 U.S.C. § 1](#) note. So every indication, in 1998 no less than in 1996, was that all the predicate crimes relate to children alone.

The majority's response to this history fails to blunt its force. According to the majority, the reference to “any state child abuse law” in the Senate Report is simply an “incomplete[] description[]” of “the state sexual-abuse predicates.” *Ante*, at 967. And similarly, the majority ventures, the DOJ letter was merely noting “one of the provision's many salient features.” *Ibid.* But

suppose that you (like the Senate Report's or DOJ letter's authors) had to paraphrase or condense the statutory language at issue here, and that you (like the majority) thought it captured *all* sexual-abuse crimes. Would you then use the phrase “any state child abuse law” as a descriptor (as the Senate Report did)? And would you refer to the whole list of state predicates as involving “sexual abuse of a minor” (as the DOJ letter did)? Of course not. But you might well use such shorthand if, alternatively, you understood the statutory language (as I do) to cover only sexual offenses against children. And so the authors of the Report and letter did here. Such documents of necessity abridge statutory language; but they do not do so by conveying an utterly false impression of what that language is most centrally about—as by describing a provision that (supposedly) covers all sexual abuse as one that reaches only child molestation.⁵

5

The majority tries to bolster its “incomplete description” claim by highlighting another summary statement in the Senate Report, but that reference merely illustrates my point. In amending [§ 2252\(b\)\(1\)](#) (and later [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#)), Congress added not only the child sexual-abuse predicates at issue here, but also a set of predicate state offenses relating to child pornography. Specifically, Congress provided a mandatory minimum sentence for individuals previously convicted of the “production, possession, receipt, mailing, sale, distribution, shipment, or transportation of child pornography.” Child Pornography Prevention Act, § 121(5), 110 Stat. 3009–30. The Senate Report described those predicate crimes in an abbreviated fashion as “relating to the production, receipt or distribution of child pornography.” [S.Rep. No. 104–358, p. 9](#) (1996). That synopsis doubtless leaves some things out, as any synopsis does; but no reader of the Report would be terribly surprised to see the fuller statutory list. The same cannot be said of the phrase “any state child abuse law” if that in fact refers to laws prohibiting *all* rape, sexual assault, and similar behavior. The majority makes the identical mistake in asserting that the DOJ letter merely “highlight[s]” one of [§ 2252\(b\)\(1\)](#)'s many features. *Ante*, at 967. To support that claim, the majority notes that the letter omits any discussion of sexual crimes against adult wards, even though the statute covers those offenses on any theory. But that elision is perfectly natural. The number of sex crimes against adult wards pales in comparison to those against children: In discussing the latter, DOJ was focused on the mine-run offense. (For the same reason, this opinion's descriptions of [§ 2252\(b\)](#) often skip any reference to wards. See *supra*, at 965, 966; *infra*, at 975. Count that as a writer's choice to avoid extraneous detail.) The majority cannot offer any similar, simple explanation of why DOJ would have repeatedly referred only to sex crimes against children if the statutory language it was explicating—and proposing to add to another provision—also covered sex crimes against all adults.

*975 Further, the majority objects that the Senate Report's (and DOJ letter's) drafters did “nothing to explain *why*” Congress would have limited [§ 2252\(b\)](#)'s state sexual-abuse predicates to those involving children when the provision's federal sexual-abuse predicates (as all agree) are not so confined. *Ante*, at 967 (emphasis in original). But Congress is under no obligation to this Court to justify its choices. (Nor is DOJ obliged to explain them to Congress itself.) Rather, the duty is on this Court to carry out those decisions, regardless of whether it understands all that lay behind them. The Senate Report (and DOJ letter too) says what it says about [§ 2252\(b\)](#)'s meaning, confirming in no uncertain terms the most natural reading of the statutory language. Explanation or no, that is more than sufficient.

And the majority (as it concedes) cannot claim that Congress simply must have wanted [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#)'s federal and state predicates to be the same. See *ante*, at 966 (“[O]ur construction of [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#)'s sexual-abuse predicates does not rely on a general assumption that Congress sought full parity between all of the federal and state predicates”). That is because both [§ 2252\(b\)\(1\)](#) and [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#) contain many federal predicates lacking state matches. Under [§ 2252\(b\)\(1\)](#), for example, a person is subject to a mandatory minimum if he previously violated [18 U.S.C. § 1591](#), which prohibits “[s]ex trafficking of children or [sex trafficking] by force, fraud, or coercion.” But if the prior conviction is under state law, only sex trafficking of children will trigger that minimum; trafficking of adults, even if by force, fraud, or coercion, will not. That mismatch—trafficking of both adults and children on the federal side, trafficking of children alone on the state side—precisely parallels my view of the sexual-abuse predicates at issue here. More generally, ten federal obscenity crimes trigger both [§ 2252\(b\)\(1\)](#)'s and [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#)'s enhanced punishments; but equivalent state crimes do not do so. And five federal prostitution offenses prompt mandatory minimums under those provisions; but no such state offenses do. Noting those disparities, the Government concedes: “[W]hen Congress adds state-law offenses to the lists of predicate offenses triggering child-pornography recidivist enhancements, it sometimes adds state offenses corresponding to only a subset of the federal offenses” previously included. Brief for United States 43. Just so. And this Court ought to enforce that choice.

III

As against the most natural construction of [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#)'s language, plus unusually limpid legislative history, the majority relies on a structural argument. See *ante*, at 963 – 965. The federal

sexual-abuse predicates in [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#), the majority begins, are described as crimes “under ... Chapter 109A,” and that chapter “criminalizes a range of sexual-abuse offenses involving adults or minors.” *Ante*, at 963 – 964 (emphasis in original). Once again, the majority cannot say that this fact alone resolves the question presented, given the many times (just discussed) that Congress opted to make federal crimes, but not equivalent state crimes, predicates for [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#)'s mandatory minimums. But *976 the majority claims to see more than that here: The headings of the sections in Chapter 109A, it contends, “mirror precisely the order ... and nearly precisely the words used to describe” the state predicate crimes at issue. *Ante*, at 964. The majority “cannot state with certainty,” but hazards a guess that Congress thus used Chapter 109A “as a template for the list of state predicates”—or, otherwise said, that Congress “followed” the “structure and language of Chapter 109A” in defining those state-law offenses. *Ibid*.

But [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#)'s state predicates are not nearly as similar to the federal crimes in Chapter 109A as the majority claims. That Chapter includes the following offenses: “Aggravated sexual abuse,” [§ 2241](#), “Sexual abuse,” [§ 2242](#), “Sexual abuse of a minor or ward,” [§ 2243](#), and “Abusive sexual contact,” [§ 2244](#). The Chapter thus contains *four* crimes—one more than found in [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#)'s list of state offenses. If the drafters of [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#) meant merely to copy Chapter 109A, why would they have left out one of its crimes? The majority has no explanation.⁶ And there is more. Suppose Congress, for whatever hard-to-fathom reason, wanted to replicate only Chapter 109A's first three offenses. It would then have used the same language, referring to “the laws of any State relating to aggravated sexual abuse, sexual abuse, or sexual abuse of a minor or ward.” (And had Congress used that language, the phrase “of a minor or ward” would clearly have applied only to the third term, to differentiate it from the otherwise identical second.) But contra the majority, see *ante*, at 964, 965 – 966, that is not what [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#)'s drafters did. Rather than repeating the phrase “sexual abuse,” they used the phrase “abusive sexual conduct” in the list's last term—which echoes, if anything, the separate crime of “abusive sexual contact” (included in Chapter 109A's *fourth* offense, as well as in other places in the federal code, see, *e.g.*, [10 U.S.C. § 920\(d\)](#)). The choice of those different words indicates, yet again, that Congress did not mean, as the majority imagines, to duplicate Chapter 109A's set of offenses.

6

In a footnote, the majority intimates that Chapter 109A contains only three crimes—but that reading is unambiguously wrong. Unlike the fifth through eighth sections of that chapter (which the majority invokes to no purpose), the fourth—again, entitled “[a]busive sexual contact”—sets out an independent substantive offense, criminalizing acts not made illegal in the first three sections. §§ 2244(a)-(c); see also [42 U.S.C. § 16911](#) (separately listing this offense in identifying who must register as a sex offender). The majority, as noted above, gives no reason why Congress would have ignored that fourth crime had it been using Chapter 109A as a template.

Indeed, even the Government has refused to accept the notion that the federal and state sexual-abuse predicates mirror each other. The Government, to be sure, has argued that it would be “anomalous” if federal, but not state, convictions for sexually abusing adults trigger [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#)'s enhanced penalty. Brief for United States 23. (I have discussed that more modest point above: Anomalous or not, such differences between federal and state predicates are a recurring feature of the statute. See *supra*, at 967 – 968.) But the Government, in both briefing and argument, rejected the idea that Congress wanted the list of state predicates in [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#) to mimic the crimes in Chapter 109A; in other words, it denied that Congress meant for the state and federal offenses to bear the same meaning. See Brief for United States 22, n. 8; Tr. of Oral Arg. 26. Even in the face of sustained questioning from Members of this Court, the Government held fast to that *977 position. See, *e.g.*, Tr. of Oral Arg. 25–26 (Justice ALITO: “[W]hy do you resist the argument that what Congress was doing was picking up basically the definitions of the Federal offenses [in Chapter 109A] that are worded almost identically?” Assistant to the Solicitor General: “[W]e don't think that Congress was trying” to do that). The listed state and federal offenses, the Government made clear, are not intended to be copies.

The majority seems to think that view somehow consistent with its own hypothesis that Chapter 109A served as a “template” for [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#)'s state predicates, *ante*, at 964; in responding to one of Lockhart's arguments, the majority remarks that the state predicates might have a “generic” meaning, distinct from Chapter 109A's, *ante*, at 968. But if that is so, the majority's supposed template is not much of a template after all. The predicate state offenses would “follow” or “parallel” Chapter 109A in a single respect, but not in any others—that is, in including sexual abuse of adults, but not in otherwise defining wrongful sexual conduct (whether concerning adults or children). *Ante*, at 964. The template, one might say, is good for this case and this case only. And the majority has no theory for why that should be so: It offers not the slimmest explanation of how

Chapter 109A can resolve today's question but not the many issues courts will face in the future involving the meaning of [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#)'s state predicate offenses. That is because no rationale would make sense. The right and consistent view is that Chapter 109A, like the other federal predicates in [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#), is across-the-board irrelevant in defining that provision's state predicates. Thus, the federal chapter's four differently worded crimes are independent of the three state offenses at issue here—all of which, for the reasons I've given, must “involv[e] a minor or ward.”

IV

Suppose, for a moment, that this case is not as clear as I've suggested. Assume there is no way to know whether to apply the last-antecedent or the series-qualifier rule. Imagine, too, that the legislative history is not quite so compelling and the majority's “template” argument not quite so strained. Who, then, should prevail?

This Court has a rule for how to resolve genuine ambiguity in criminal statutes: in favor of the criminal defendant. As the majority puts the point, the rule of lenity insists that courts side with the defendant “when the ordinary canons of statutory construction have revealed no satisfactory construction.” *Ante*, at 968 (citing [Callanan v. United States](#), 364 U.S. 587, 596, 81 S.Ct. 321, 5 L.Ed.2d 312 (1961)); see also [Bifulco v. United States](#), 447 U.S. 381, 387, 100 S.Ct. 2247, 65 L.Ed.2d 205 (1980) (holding that the rule of lenity “applies not only to interpretations of the substantive ambit of criminal prohibitions, but also to the penalties they impose”). At the very least, that principle should tip the scales in Lockhart's favor, because nothing the majority has said shows that the modifying clause in [§ 2252\(b\)\(2\)](#) *unambiguously* applies to only the last term in the preceding series.

But in fact, Lockhart's case is stronger. Consider the following sentence, summarizing various points made above: “The series-qualifier principle, the legislative history, and the rule of lenity discussed in this opinion all point in the same direction.” Now answer the following question: Has only the rule of lenity been discussed in this opinion, or have the series-qualifier principle and the legislative history been discussed as well? Even had you not read the preceding 16-plus pages, you would know the right answer—because of the *978 ordinary way all of us use language. That, in the end, is why Lockhart should win.

140 S.Ct. 2452
Supreme Court of the United States.

Jimcy MCGIRT, Petitioner
v.
OKLAHOMA
No. 18-9526

Argued May 11, 2020
Decided July 9, 2020

[GORSUCH, J., delivered the opinion of the Court, in which GINSBURG, BREYER, SOTOMAYOR, and KAGAN, JJ., joined. ROBERTS, C. J., filed a dissenting opinion, in which ALITO and KAVANAUGH, JJ., joined, and in which THOMAS, J., joined, except as to footnote 9. THOMAS, J., filed a dissenting opinion.]

Justice GORSUCH delivered the opinion of the Court.

*2459 On the far end of the Trail of Tears was a promise. Forced to leave their ancestral lands in Georgia and Alabama, the Creek Nation received assurances that their new lands in the West would be secure forever. In exchange for ceding “all their land, East of the Mississippi river,” the U. S. government agreed by treaty that “[t]he Creek country west of the Mississippi shall be solemnly guarantied to the Creek Indians.” Treaty With the Creeks (1832). Both parties settled on boundary lines for a new and “permanent home to the whole Creek nation,” located in what is now Oklahoma. Treaty With the Creeks (1833). The government further promised that “[no] State or Territory [shall] ever have a right to pass laws for the government of such Indians, but they shall be allowed to govern themselves.” 1832 Treaty.

Today we are asked whether the land these treaties promised remains an Indian reservation for purposes of federal criminal law. Because Congress has not said otherwise, we hold the government to its word.

I

[The Major Crimes Act (MCA) provides that, within “the Indian country,” “[a]ny Indian who commits” certain enumerated offenses “shall be subject to the same law and penalties as all other persons committing any of [those] offenses, within the exclusive jurisdiction of the United States.” “Indian country” includes “all land within the limits of any Indian reservation under the jurisdiction of the United States Government.” Petitioner Jimcy McGirt was convicted by an Oklahoma state court of three serious sexual offenses. He unsuccessfully argued in state postconviction proceedings that the State lacked jurisdiction to prosecute him because he is an enrolled member of the Seminole Nation and his crimes took place on the Creek Reservation. He seeks a new trial, which, he contends, must take place in federal court.]

II

Start with what should be obvious: Congress established a reservation for the Creeks. In a series of treaties, Congress not only “solemnly guarantied” the land but also “establish[ed] boundary lines which will secure a country and permanent home to the whole Creek Nation of Indians.” 1832 Treaty, Art. XIV, 7 Stat. 368; 1833 Treaty, preamble, 7 Stat. 418. . . .

There is a final set of assurances that bear mention, too. In the Treaty of 1856, Congress promised that “no portion” of the Creek Reservation “shall ever be embraced or included within, or annexed to, any Territory or State.” And within their lands, with exceptions, the Creeks were to be “secured in the unrestricted right of self-government,” with “full jurisdiction” over enrolled Tribe members and their property. So the Creek were promised not only a “permanent home” that would be *2462 “forever set apart”; they were also assured a right to self-government on lands that would lie outside both the legal jurisdiction and geographic boundaries of any State. Under any definition, this was a reservation.

III

A

While there can be no question that Congress established a reservation for the Creek Nation, it's equally clear that Congress has since broken more than a few of its promises to the Tribe. Not least, the land described in the parties' treaties, once undivided and held by the Tribe, is now fractured into pieces. While these pieces were initially distributed to Tribe members, many were sold and now belong to persons unaffiliated with the Nation. So in what sense, if any, can we say that the Creek Reservation persists today?

To determine whether a tribe continues to hold a reservation, there is only one place we may look: the Acts of Congress. This Court long ago held that the Legislature wields significant constitutional authority when it comes to tribal relations, possessing even the authority to breach its own promises and treaties. [¶ Lone Wolf v. Hitchcock, 187 U.S. 553, 566–568, 23 S.Ct. 216, 47 L.Ed. 299 \(1903\)](#). But that power, this Court has cautioned, belongs to Congress alone. Nor will this Court lightly infer such a breach once Congress has established a reservation. [¶ Solem v. Bartlett, 465 U.S. 463, 470, 104 S.Ct. 1161, 79 L.Ed.2d 443 \(1984\)](#). . . .

History shows that Congress knows how to withdraw a reservation when it can muster the will. Sometimes, legislation has provided an “[e]xplicit reference to cession” or an “unconditional commitment . . . to compensate the Indian tribe for its opened land.” [¶ Ibid.](#) Other times, Congress has directed that tribal lands shall be “‘restored to the public domain.’” [¶ Hagen v. Utah, 510 U.S. 399, 412, 114 S.Ct. 958, 127 L.Ed.2d 252 \(1994\)](#) (emphasis deleted). *2463 Likewise, Congress might speak of a reservation as being “‘discontinued,’” “‘abolished,’” or “‘vacated.’” [¶ Mattz v. Arnett, 412 U.S. 481, 504, n. 22, 93 S.Ct. 2245, 37 L.Ed.2d 92 \(1973\)](#). Disestablishment has “never required any particular form of words,” [¶ Hagen, 510 U.S., at 411, 114 S.Ct. 958](#). But it does require that Congress clearly express its intent to do so, “[c]ommon[ly with an] ‘[e]xplicit reference to cession or other language evidencing the present and total surrender of all tribal interests.’” [¶ Nebraska v. Parker, 577 U.S. 481, ———, 136 S.Ct. 1072, 1079, 194 L.Ed.2d 152 \(2016\)](#).

B

In an effort to show Congress has done just that with the Creek Reservation, Oklahoma points to events during the so-called “allotment era.” Starting in the 1880s, Congress sought to pressure many tribes to abandon their communal lifestyles and parcel their lands into smaller lots owned by individual tribe members. Some allotment advocates hoped that the policy would create a class of assimilated, landowning, agrarian Native Americans. Others may have hoped that, with lands in individual hands and (eventually) freely alienable, white settlers would have more space of their own.

The Creek were hardly exempt from the pressures of the allotment era. In 1893, Congress charged the Dawes Commission with negotiating changes to the Creek Reservation. Congress identified two goals: Either persuade the Creek to cede territory to the United States, as it had before, or agree to allot its lands to Tribe members. A year later, the Commission reported back that the Tribe “would not, under any circumstances, agree to cede any portion of their lands.” At that time, before this Court's decision in [¶ Lone Wolf](#), Congress may not have been entirely sure of its power to terminate an established reservation unilaterally. Perhaps for that reason, perhaps

for others, the Commission and Congress took this report seriously and turned their attention to allotment rather than cession.

The Commission's work culminated in an allotment agreement with the Tribe in 1901. Creek Allotment Agreement, ch. 676, 31 Stat. 861. With exceptions for certain pre-existing town sites and other special matters, the Agreement established procedures for allotting 160-acre parcels to individual Tribe members who could not sell, transfer, or otherwise encumber their allotments for a number of years. §§ 3, 7, *id.*, at 862–864 (5 years for any portion, 21 years for the designated “homestead” portion). Tribe members were given deeds for their parcels that “convey[ed] to [them] all right, title, and interest of the Creek Nation.” § 23, *id.*, at 867–868. In 1908, Congress relaxed these alienation restrictions in some ways, and even allowed the Secretary of the Interior to waive them. Act of May 27, 1908, ch. 199, § 1, 35 Stat. 312. One way or the other, individual Tribe members were eventually free to sell their land to Indians and non-Indians alike.

*2464 Missing in all this, however, is a statute evincing anything like the “present and total surrender of all tribal interests” in the affected lands. Without doubt, in 1832 the Creek “cede[d]” their original homelands east of the Mississippi for a reservation promised in what is now Oklahoma. 1832 Treaty, Art. I, 7 Stat. 366. And in 1866, they “cede[d] and convey[ed]” a portion of that reservation to the United States. Treaty With the Creek, Art. III, 14 Stat. 786. But because there exists no equivalent law terminating what remained, the Creek Reservation survived allotment. . . .

C

If allotment by itself won't work, Oklahoma seeks to prove disestablishment by pointing to other ways Congress intruded on the Creek's promised right to self-governance during the allotment era. It turns out there were many. For example, just a few years before the 1901 Creek Allotment Agreement, and perhaps in an effort to pressure the Tribe to the negotiating table, Congress abolished the Creeks' tribal courts and transferred all pending civil and criminal cases to the U. S. Courts of the Indian Territory. Curtis Act of 1898, § 28, 30 Stat. 504–505. Separately, *2466 the Creek Allotment Agreement provided that tribal ordinances “affecting the lands of the Tribe, or of individuals after allotment, or the moneys or other property of the Tribe, or of the citizens thereof ” would not be valid until approved by the President of the United States. § 42, 31 Stat. 872.

Plainly, these laws represented serious blows to the Creek. But, just as plainly, they left the Tribe with significant sovereign functions over the lands in question. For example, the Creek Nation retained the power to collect taxes, operate schools, legislate through tribal ordinances, and, soon, oversee the federally mandated allotment process. §§ 39, 40, 42, *id.*, at 871–872; [Buster v. Wright, 135 F. 947, 949–950, 953–954 \(C.A.8 1905\)](#). And, in its own way, the congressional incursion on tribal legislative processes only served to prove the power: Congress would have had no need to subject tribal legislation to Presidential review if the Tribe lacked any authority to legislate. Grave though they were, these congressional intrusions on pre-existing treaty rights fell short of eliminating all tribal interests in the land. . . .

In the years that followed, Congress continued to adjust its arrangements with the Tribe. . . .

Maybe some of these changes happened for altruistic reasons, maybe some for other reasons. It seems, for example, that at least certain Members of Congress hesitated about disestablishment in 1906 because they feared any reversion of the Creek lands to the public domain would trigger a statutory commitment to hand over portions of these lands to already powerful railroad interests. Many of those who advanced the reorganization efforts of the 1930s may have done so more out of frustration with efforts to assimilate Native Americans than any disaffection with assimilation *2468 as the ultimate goal. But whatever the confluence of reasons, in all this history there simply arrived no moment when any Act of Congress dissolved the Creek Tribe or disestablished its reservation. In the end, Congress moved in the opposite direction.

D

Ultimately, Oklahoma is left to pursue a very different sort of argument. Now, the State points to historical practices and demographics, both around the time of and long after the enactment of all the relevant legislation. These facts, the State submits, are enough by themselves to prove disestablishment. Oklahoma even classifies and categorizes how we should approach the question of disestablishment into three “steps.” It reads [Solem](#) as requiring us to examine the laws passed by Congress at the first step, contemporary events at the second, and even later events and demographics at the third. On the State's account, we have so far finished only the first step; two more await.

This is mistaken. When interpreting Congress's work in this arena, no less than any other, our charge is usually to ascertain and follow the original meaning of the law before us. [New Prime Inc. v. Oliveira](#), 586 U. S. ———, ———, 139 S.Ct. 532, 538–539, 202 L.Ed.2d 536 (2019). That is the only “step” proper for a court of law. To be sure, if during the course of our work an ambiguous statutory term or phrase emerges, we will sometimes consult contemporaneous usages, customs, and practices to the extent they shed light on the meaning of the language in question at the time of enactment. [Ibid.](#) But Oklahoma does not point to any ambiguous language in any of the relevant statutes that could plausibly be read as an Act of disestablishment. Nor may a court favor contemporaneous or later practices *instead of* the laws Congress passed.

...

To avoid further confusion, we restate the point. There is no need to consult extratextual sources when the meaning of a statute's terms is clear. Nor may extratextual sources overcome those terms. The only role such materials can properly play is to help “clear up ... not create” ambiguity about a statute's original meaning. [Milner v. Department of Navy](#), 562 U.S. 562, 574, 131 S.Ct. 1259, 179 L.Ed.2d 268 (2011). And, as we have said time and again, once a reservation is established, it retains that status “until Congress explicitly indicates otherwise.” [Solem](#), 465 U.S., at 470, 104 S.Ct. 1161 (citing [Celestine](#), 215 U.S., at 285, 30 S.Ct. 93); see also [Yankton Sioux](#), 522 U.S., at 343, 118 S.Ct. 789 (“[O]nly Congress can alter the terms of an Indian treaty by diminishing a reservation, and its intent to do so must be clear and plain”) (citation and internal quotation marks omitted).

The dissent charges that we have failed to take account of the “compelling reasons” for considering extratextual evidence *2470 as a matter of course. *Post*, at 2487 – 2488. But Oklahoma and the dissent have cited no case in which this Court has found a reservation disestablished without first concluding that a statute required that result. Perhaps they wish this case to be the first. To follow Oklahoma and the dissent down that path, though, would only serve to allow States and courts to finish work Congress has left undone, usurp the legislative function in the process, and treat Native American claims of statutory right as less valuable than others. None of that can be reconciled with our normal interpretive rules, let alone our rule that disestablishment may not be lightly inferred and treaty rights are to be construed in favor, not against, tribal rights. [Solem](#), 465 U.S., at 472, 104 S.Ct. 1161. . . .

*2474 In the end, only one message rings true. Even the carefully selected history Oklahoma and the dissent recite is not nearly as tidy as they suggest. It supplies us with little help in discerning the law's meaning and much potential for mischief. If anything, the persistent if unspoken message here seems to be that we should be taken by the “practical advantages” of ignoring the written law. How much easier it would be, after all, to let the State proceed as it has always assumed it might. But just imagine what it would mean to indulge that path. A State exercises jurisdiction over Native Americans with such persistence that the practice seems normal. Indian landowners lose their titles by fraud or otherwise in sufficient volume that no one remembers whose land it once was. All this continues for long enough that a reservation that was once beyond doubt becomes questionable, and then even farfetched. Sprinkle in a few predictions here, some contestable commentary there, and the job is done, a reservation is disestablished. None of these moves would be permitted in any other area of statutory interpretation, and there is no reason why they should be permitted here. That would be the rule of the strong, not the rule of law. . . .

VI

In the end, Oklahoma abandons any pretense of law and speaks openly about the potentially

“transform[ative]” effects of a loss today. . . .

In reaching our conclusion about what the law demands of us today, we do not pretend to foretell the future and we proceed well aware of the potential for cost and conflict around jurisdictional boundaries, especially ones that have gone unappreciated for so long. But it is unclear why pessimism should rule the day. With the passage of time, Oklahoma and its Tribes have proven they can work successfully together as partners. Already, the State has negotiated hundreds of intergovernmental agreements with tribes, including many with the Creek. These agreements relate to taxation, law enforcement, vehicle registration, hunting and fishing, and countless other fine regulatory questions. No one before us claims that the spirit of good faith, “comity and cooperative sovereignty” behind these agreements, will be imperiled by an adverse decision for the State today any more than it might be by a favorable one. And, of course, should agreement prove elusive, Congress remains free to supplement its statutory directions about the lands in question at any *2482 time. It has no shortage of tools at its disposal.

*

The federal government promised the Creek a reservation in perpetuity. Over time, Congress has diminished that reservation. It has sometimes restricted and other times expanded the Tribe's authority. But Congress has never withdrawn the promised reservation. As a result, many of the arguments before us today follow a sadly familiar pattern. Yes, promises were made, but the price of keeping them has become too great, so now we should just cast a blind eye. We reject that thinking. If Congress wishes to withdraw its promises, it must say so. Unlawful acts, performed long enough and with sufficient vigor, are never enough to amend the law. To hold otherwise would be to elevate the most brazen and longstanding injustices over the law, both rewarding wrong and failing those in the right.

The judgment of the Court of Criminal Appeals of Oklahoma is

Reversed.

Chief Justice [ROBERTS](#), with whom Justice [ALITO](#) and Justice [KAVANAUGH](#) join, and with whom Justice [THOMAS](#) joins except as to footnote 9, dissenting.

In 1997, the State of Oklahoma convicted petitioner Jimcy McGirt of molesting, raping, and forcibly sodomizing a four-year-old girl, his wife's granddaughter. McGirt was sentenced to 1,000 years plus life in prison. Today, the Court holds that Oklahoma lacked jurisdiction to prosecute McGirt—on the improbable ground that, unbeknownst to anyone for the past century, a huge swathe of Oklahoma is actually a Creek Indian reservation, on which the State may not prosecute serious crimes committed by Indians like McGirt. Not only does the Court discover a Creek reservation that spans three million acres and includes most of the city of Tulsa, but the Court's reasoning portends that there are four more such reservations in Oklahoma. The rediscovered reservations encompass the entire eastern half of the State—19 million acres that are home to 1.8 million people, only 10%–15% of whom are Indians.

Across this vast area, the State's ability to prosecute serious crimes will be hobbled and decades of past convictions could well be thrown out. On top of that, the Court has profoundly destabilized the governance of eastern Oklahoma. The decision today creates significant uncertainty for the State's continuing authority over any area that touches Indian affairs, ranging from zoning and taxation to family and environmental law.

None of this is warranted. What has gone unquestioned for a century remains true today: A huge portion of Oklahoma is not a Creek Indian reservation. Congress disestablished any reservation in a series of statutes leading up to Oklahoma statehood at the turn of the 19th century. The Court reaches the opposite conclusion only by disregarding the “well settled” approach required by our precedents. [■ *Nebraska v. Parker*, 577 U. S. 481, ———, 136 S.Ct. 1072, 1078, 194 L.Ed.2d 152 \(2016\).](#)

Under those precedents, we determine whether Congress intended to disestablish a reservation

by examining the relevant Acts of Congress and “all the [surrounding] circumstances,” including the “contemporaneous and subsequent understanding of the status of the reservation.” [¶ *Id.*, at ----, 136 S.Ct., at 1079](#) (internal quotation marks omitted). Yet the Court declines to consider such understandings here, preferring to examine only individual statutes in isolation.

*2483 Applying the broader inquiry our precedents require, a reservation did not exist when McGirt committed his crimes, so Oklahoma had jurisdiction to prosecute him. I respectfully dissent.

I

... A century of practice confirms that the Five Tribes’ prior domains were extinguished. The State has maintained unquestioned jurisdiction for more than 100 years. Tribe members make up less than 10%–15% of the population of their former domain, and until a few years ago the Creek Nation itself acknowledged that it no longer possessed the reservation the Court discovers today. This on-the-ground reality is enshrined throughout the U. S. Code, which repeatedly terms the Five Tribes’ prior holdings the “former” Indian reservations in Oklahoma. As the Tribes, the State, and Congress have recognized from the outset, those “reservations were destroyed” when “Oklahoma entered the Union.”

II

Much of this important context is missing from the Court's opinion, for the Court restricts itself to viewing each of the statutes enacted by Congress in a vacuum. That approach is wholly inconsistent with our precedents on reservation disestablishment, which require a highly contextual inquiry. Our “touchstone” is congressional “purpose” or “intent.” [¶ *South Dakota v. Yankton Sioux Tribe*, 522 U.S. 329, 343, 118 S.Ct. 789, 139 L.Ed.2d 773 \(1998\)](#). To “decipher Congress’ intention” in this specialized area, we are instructed to consider three categories of evidence: the relevant Acts passed by Congress; the contemporaneous understanding of those Acts and the historical context surrounding their passage; and the subsequent understanding of the status of the reservation and the pattern of settlement there. [¶ *Solem v. Bartlett*, 465 U.S. 463, 470–472, 104 S.Ct. 1161, 79 L.Ed.2d 443 \(1984\)](#). The Court resists calling these “steps,” because “the only ‘step’ proper for a court of law” is interpreting the laws enacted by Congress. Any label is fine with us. What matters is that these are categories of evidence that our precedents “direct[] us” to examine *in determining* whether the laws enacted by Congress disestablished a reservation. [¶ *Hagen v. Utah*, 510 U.S. 399, 410–411, 114 S.Ct. 958, 127 L.Ed.2d 252 \(1994\)](#). Because those precedents are not followed by the Court today, it is necessary to describe several at length.

In [¶ *Solem v. Bartlett*, 465 U.S. 463, 104 S.Ct. 1161, 79 L.Ed.2d 443 \(1984\)](#), a unanimous Court summarized the appropriate methodology. “Congress [must] clearly evince an intent to change boundaries before diminishment will be found.” [¶ *Id.*, at 470, 104 S.Ct. 1161](#) (internal quotation marks and alterations omitted). This inquiry first considers the “statutory language used to open the Indian lands,” which is the “most probative evidence of congressional intent.” [¶ *Ibid.*](#) “Explicit reference to cession or other language evidencing the present and total surrender of all tribal interests strongly suggests that Congress meant to divest from the reservation all unallotted opened lands.” [¶ *Ibid.*](#) But “explicit language of cession and unconditional compensation are not prerequisites” for a *2486 finding of disestablishment. [¶ *Id.*, at 471, 104 S.Ct. 1161.](#)

Second, we consider “events surrounding the passage of [an] Act—particularly the manner in which the transaction was negotiated with the tribes involved and the tenor of legislative Reports presented to Congress.” [¶ *Ibid.*](#) When such materials “unequivocally reveal a widely held, contemporaneous understanding that the affected reservation would shrink as a result of the proposed legislation,” we will “infer that Congress shared the understanding that its action would diminish the reservation,” even in the face of “statutory language that would otherwise suggest reservation boundaries remained unchanged.” [¶ *Ibid.*](#)

Third, to a “lesser extent,” we examine “events that occurred after the passage of [an] Act to

decipher Congress' intentions." [Ibid.](#) "Congress' own treatment of the affected areas, particularly in the years immediately following the opening, has some evidentiary value, as does the manner in which the Bureau of Indian Affairs and local judicial authorities dealt with [the areas]." [Ibid.](#) In addition, "we have recognized that who actually moved onto opened reservation lands is also relevant." [Ibid.](#) "Where non-Indian settlers flooded into the opened portion of a reservation and the area has long since lost its Indian character, we have acknowledged that *de facto*, if not *de jure*, diminishment may have occurred." [Ibid.](#) This "subsequent demographic history" provides an "additional clue as to what Congress expected would happen." [Id.](#), at 471–472, 104 S.Ct. 1161.

Fifteen years later, another unanimous Court described the same methodology more pithily in [South Dakota v. Yankton Sioux Tribe](#), 522 U.S. 329, 118 S.Ct.789, 139 L.Ed.2d 773 (1998). First, the Court reiterated that the "most probative evidence of diminishment is, of course, the statutory language." [Id.](#), at 344, 118 S.Ct. 789 (internal quotation marks omitted). The Court continued that it would also consider, second, "the historical context surrounding the passage of the ... Acts," and third, "the subsequent treatment of the area in question and the pattern of settlement there." [Ibid.](#) (quoting [Hagen](#), 510 U.S., at 411, 114 S.Ct. 958).

The Court today treats these precedents as aging relics in need of "clarif[ication]." But these precedents have been clear enough for some time. Just a few Terms ago, the same inquiry was described as "well settled" by the unanimous Court in [Nebraska v. Parker](#), 577 U.S. 481, ----, 136 S.Ct. 1072, 1078, 194 L.Ed.2d 152 (2016). . . .

Today the Court does not even discuss the governing approach reiterated throughout these precedents. The Court briefly recites the general rule that disestablishment requires clear congressional "intent," but the Court then declines to examine the categories of evidence that our precedents demand we consider. Instead, the Court argues at length that allotment alone is not *2487 enough to disestablish a reservation. Then the Court argues that the "many" "serious blows" dealt by Congress to tribal governance, and the creation of the new State of Oklahoma, are each insufficient for disestablishment. Then the Court emphasizes that "historical practices or current demographics" do not "by themselves" "suffice" to disestablish a reservation.

This is a school of red herrings. No one here contends that any individual congressional action or piece of evidence, standing alone, disestablished the Creek reservation. Rather, Oklahoma contends that all of the relevant Acts of Congress together, viewed in light of contemporaneous and subsequent contextual evidence, demonstrate Congress's intent to disestablish the reservation. "[O]ur traditional approach ...requires us" to determine Congress's intent by "examin[ing] all the circumstances surrounding the opening of a reservation." [Hagen](#), 510 U.S., at 412, 114 S.Ct. 958 (emphasis added). Yet the Court refuses to confront the cumulative import of all of Congress's actions here.

The Court instead announces a new approach sharply restricting consideration of contemporaneous and subsequent evidence of congressional intent. The Court states that such "extratextual sources" may be considered in "only" one narrow circumstance: to help " 'clear up' " ambiguity in a particular "statutory term or phrase."

But, if that is the right approach, what have we been doing all these years? Every single one of our disestablishment cases has considered extratextual sources, and in doing so, none has required the identification of ambiguity in a particular term. That is because, while it is well established that Congress's "intent" must be "clear," in this area we have expressly held that the appropriate inquiry does not focus on the statutory text alone.

Today the Court suggests that only the text can satisfy the longstanding requirement that Congress "explicitly indicate[]" its intent. The Court reiterates that a reservation persists unless Congress "said otherwise," *ante*, at 2459; if Congress wishes to disestablish a reservation, "it must say so," with the right "language." Our precedents disagree. They explain that disestablishment can occur "[e]ven in the absence of a clear expression of congressional purpose in the text of [the] Act." [Yankton Sioux Tribe](#), 522 U.S., at 351, 118 S.Ct. 789. The "notion" that "express language in an Act is the *only* method by which congressional action may result in disestablishment" is

“quite inconsistent” with our precedents. [Rosebud Sioux Tribe v. Kneip](#), 430 U.S. 584, 586, 588, n. 4, 97 S.Ct. 1361, 51 L.Ed.2d 660 (1977); see [Solem](#), 465 U.S., at 471, 104 S.Ct. 1161 (intent may be discerned from a “widely held, contemporaneous understanding,” “notwithstanding the presence of statutory language that would otherwise suggest reservation boundaries remained unchanged”); see also [DeCoteau v. District Court for Tenth Judicial Dist.](#), 420 U.S. 425, 444, 95 S.Ct. 1082, 43 L.Ed.2d 300 (1975); [Mattz v. Arnett](#), 412 U.S. 481, 505, 93 S.Ct. 2245, 37 L.Ed.2d 92 (1973).

. . . . Unless the Court is prepared to overrule these precedents, it should follow them.

III

Applied properly, our precedents demonstrate that Congress disestablished any reservation possessed by the Creek Nation through a relentless series of statutes leading up to Oklahoma statehood.

A

. . . . There are good reasons the statutes here do not include the language the Court looks for, and those reasons have nothing to do with *2490 a failure to disestablish the reservation. Respect for Congress's work requires us to look at what it actually did, not search in vain for what it might have done or did on other occasions.

What Congress actually did here was enact a series of statutes beginning in 1890 and culminating with Oklahoma statehood that (1) established a uniform legal system for Indians and non-Indians alike; (2) dismantled the Creek government; (3) extinguished the Creek Nation's title to the lands at issue; and (4) incorporated the Creek members into a new political community—the State of Oklahoma. These statutes evince Congress's intent to terminate the reservation and create a new State in its place. . . .

These statutes evince a clear intent to leave the Creek Nation with no communally held land and no meaningful governing authority to exercise over the newly distributed parcels. Contrary to the Court's portrayal, this is not a scenario in which Congress allowed a tribe to “continue to exercise governmental functions over land” that it “no longer own[ed] communally.” *Ante*, at 2464. From top to bottom, these statutes, which divested the Tribes and the United States of their interests while displacing tribal governance, “strongly suggest[] that Congress meant to divest” the lands of reservation status. [Solem](#), 465 U.S., at 470, 104 S.Ct. 1161.

Finally, having stripped the Creek Nation of its laws, its powers of self-governance, and its land, Congress incorporated the Nation's members into a new political community. Congress made “every Indian” in the Oklahoma territory a citizen of the United States in 1901—decades before conferring citizenship on all native born Indians elsewhere in the country. Act of Mar. 3, 1901. In the Oklahoma Enabling Act of 1906—the gateway to statehood—Congress confirmed that members of the Five Tribes would participate in equal measure alongside non-Indians in the choice regarding statehood. The Act gave Indians the right to vote on delegates to a constitutional convention *2493 and ultimately on the state constitution that the delegates proposed. Fifteen members of the Five Tribes were elected as convention delegates, many of them served on significant committees, and a member of the Chickasaw Nation even served as president of the convention.

The Enabling Act also ensured that Indians and non-Indians would be subject to uniform laws and courts. . . .

In sum, in statute after statute, Congress made abundantly clear its intent to disestablish the Creek territory. The Court, for purposes of the disestablishment question before us, defines the Creek territory as “lands that would lie outside both the legal jurisdiction and geographic boundaries of any State” and on which a tribe was “assured a right to self-government.” That

territory was eliminated. By establishing uniform laws for Indians and non-Indians alike in the new State of Oklahoma, Congress brought Creek members and the land on which they resided under state jurisdiction. By stripping the Creek Nation of its courts, lawmaking authority, and taxing power, Congress dismantled the tribal government. By extinguishing the Nation's title, Congress erased the geographic boundaries that once defined Creek territory. And, by conferring citizenship on tribe members and giving them a vote in the formation of the State, Congress incorporated them into a new political community. "Under any definition," that was disestablishment. . . .

B

Under our precedents, we next consider the contemporaneous understanding of the statutes enacted by Congress and the subsequent treatment of the lands at issue. The Court, however, declines to consider such evidence because, in the Court's view, the statutes clearly do not disestablish any reservation, and there is no "ambiguity" to "clear up." That is not the approach demanded by our precedent, and, in any event, the Court's argument fails on its own terms here. I find it hard to see how anyone can come away from the statutory texts detailed above with *certainty* that Congress had no intent to disestablish the territorial reservation. At the very least, the statutes leave some ambiguity, and thus "extratextual sources" ought to be consulted.

Turning to such sources, our precedents direct us to "examine all the circumstances" surrounding Congress's actions. [Parker, 577 U. S., at ———, 136 S.Ct., at 1079](#) (quoting [Hagen, 510 U.S., at 412, 114 S.Ct. 958](#)). This includes evidence of the "contemporaneous understanding" of the status of the reservation and the "history surrounding the passage" of the relevant Acts. [Parker, 577 U. S., at ———, 136 S.Ct., at 1080](#) (internal quotation marks omitted); see [Yankton Sioux Tribe, 522 U.S., at 351–354, 118 S.Ct. 789](#); [Solem, 465 U.S., at 471, 104 S.Ct. 1161](#). The available evidence overwhelmingly confirms that Congress *2495 eliminated any Creek reservation. That was the purpose identified by Congress, the Dawes Commission, and the Creek Nation itself. And that was the understanding demonstrated by the actions of Oklahoma, the United States, and the Creek. . . .

C

Finally, consider "the subsequent treatment of the area in question and the pattern of settlement there." [Yankton Sioux Tribe, 522 U.S., at 344, 118 S.Ct. 789](#). This evidence includes the "subsequent understanding of the status of the reservation by members and nonmembers as well as the United States and the [relevant] State," and the "subsequent demographic history" of the area. [Parker, 577 U. S., at ———, ———, 136 S.Ct., at 1079, 1081](#); see [Solem, 465 U.S., at 471, 104 S.Ct. 1161](#). Each of the indicia from our precedents—subsequent treatment by Congress, the State's unquestioned exercise of jurisdiction, and demographic evidence—confirms that the Creek reservation did not survive statehood. . . .

* * *

As the Creek, the State of Oklahoma, the United States, and our judicial predecessors have long agreed, Congress disestablished any Creek reservation more than 100 years ago. Oklahoma therefore had jurisdiction to prosecute McGirt. I respectfully dissent. .

140 S.Ct. 1731
Supreme Court of the United States.

Gerald Lynn BOSTOCK, Petitioner

v.

[CLAYTON COUNTY, GEORGIA](#);
[Altitude Express, Inc.](#), et al., Petitioners

v.

Melissa Zarda and William Allen Moore, Jr., Co-Independent Executors of the Estate of
Donald Zarda;

[R.G. & G.R. Harris Funeral Homes, Inc.](#), Petitioner

v.

Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, et al.
No. 17–1618, No. 17–1623, No. 18–107

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Argued October 8, 2019

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Decided June 15, 2020

[[GORSUCH](#), J., delivered the opinion of the Court, in which [ROBERTS](#), C.J., and [GINSBURG](#), [BREYER](#), [SOTOMAYOR](#), and [KAGAN](#), JJ., joined. [ALITO](#), J., filed a dissenting opinion, in which [THOMAS](#), J., joined. [KAVANAUGH](#), J., filed a dissenting opinion.]

Justice [GORSUCH](#) delivered the opinion of the Court.

*1737 Sometimes small gestures can have unexpected consequences. Major initiatives practically guarantee them. In our time, few pieces of federal legislation rank in significance with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. There, in Title VII, Congress outlawed discrimination in the workplace on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Today, we must decide whether an employer can fire someone simply for being homosexual or transgender. The answer is clear. An employer who fires an individual for being homosexual or transgender fires that person for traits or actions it would not have questioned in members of a different sex. Sex plays a necessary and undisguisable role in the decision, exactly what Title VII forbids.

Those who adopted the Civil Rights Act might not have anticipated their work would lead to this particular result. Likely, they weren't thinking about many of the Act's consequences that have become apparent over the years, including its prohibition against discrimination on the basis of motherhood or its ban on the sexual harassment of male employees. But the limits of the drafters' imagination supply no reason to ignore the law's demands. When the express terms of a statute give us one answer and extratextual considerations suggest another, it's no contest. Only the written word is the law, and all persons are entitled to its benefit.

I

Few facts are needed to appreciate the legal question we face. Each of the three cases before us started the same way: An employer fired a long-time employee shortly after the employee revealed that he or she is homosexual or transgender—and allegedly for no reason other than the employee's homosexuality or transgender status. . . .

II

This Court normally interprets a statute in accord with the ordinary public meaning of its terms at the time of its enactment. After all, only the words on the page constitute the law adopted by Congress and approved by the President. If judges could add to, remodel, update, or detract from old statutory terms inspired only by extratextual sources and our own imaginations, we would risk amending statutes outside the legislative process reserved for the people's representatives. And we would deny the people the right to continue relying on the original meaning of the law

they have counted on to settle their rights and obligations.

With this in mind, our task is clear. We must determine the ordinary public meaning of Title VII's command that it is "unlawful ... for an employer to fail or refuse to hire or to discharge any individual, or otherwise to discriminate against any individual with respect to his compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment, because of such individual's race, color, religion, sex, or national origin." To do so, we orient ourselves to the time of the statute's adoption, here 1964, and begin by examining *1739 the key statutory terms in turn before assessing their impact on the cases at hand and then confirming our work against this Court's precedents.

A

The only statutorily protected characteristic at issue in today's cases is "sex"—and that is also the primary term in Title VII whose meaning the parties dispute. Appealing to roughly contemporaneous dictionaries, the employers say that, as used here, the term "sex" in 1964 referred to "status as either male or female [as] determined by reproductive biology." The employees counter by submitting that, even in 1964, the term bore a broader scope, capturing more than anatomy and reaching at least some norms concerning gender identity and sexual orientation. But because nothing in our approach to these cases turns on the outcome of the parties' debate, and because the employees concede the point for argument's sake, we proceed on the assumption that "sex" signified what the employers suggest, referring only to biological distinctions between male and female.

Still, that's just a starting point. The question isn't just what "sex" meant, but what Title VII says about it. Most notably, the statute prohibits employers from taking certain actions "because of" sex. And, as this Court has previously explained, "the ordinary meaning of 'because of' is 'by reason of' or 'on account of.'" [University of Tex. Southwestern Medical Center v. Nassar, 570 U.S. 338, 350, 133 S.Ct. 2517, 186 L.Ed.2d 503 \(2013\)](#) (citing [Gross v. FBL Financial Services, Inc., 557 U.S. 167, 176, 129 S.Ct. 2343, 174 L.Ed.2d 119 \(2009\)](#); quotation altered). In the language of law, this means that Title VII's "because of" test incorporates the "simple" and "traditional" standard of but-for causation. [Nassar, 570 U.S. at 346, 360, 133 S.Ct. 2517](#). That form of causation is established whenever a particular outcome would not have happened "but for" the purported cause. See [Gross, 557 U.S. at 176, 129 S.Ct. 2343](#). In other words, a but-for test directs us to change one thing at a time and see if the outcome changes. If it does, we have found a but-for cause.

This can be a sweeping standard. Often, events have multiple but-for causes. So, for example, if a car accident occurred *both* because the defendant ran a red light *and* because the plaintiff failed to signal his turn at the intersection, we might call each a but-for cause of the collision. When it comes to Title VII, the adoption of the traditional but-for causation standard means a defendant cannot avoid liability just by citing some *other* factor that contributed to its challenged employment decision. So long as the plaintiff's sex was one but-for cause of that decision, that is enough to trigger the law.

No doubt, Congress could have taken a more parsimonious approach. As it has in other statutes, it could have added "solely" to indicate that actions taken "because of" the confluence of multiple factors do not violate the law. Cf. [11 U.S.C. § 525](#); [16 U.S.C. § 511](#). Or it could have written "primarily because of" to indicate that the prohibited factor had to be the main cause of the defendant's challenged employment decision. Cf. [22 U.S.C. § 2688](#). But none of this is the law we have. If anything, Congress has moved in the opposite direction, supplementing Title VII in 1991 to allow a plaintiff to prevail merely by showing that a protected trait like sex was a "motivating factor" in a defendant's challenged employment practice. Civil Rights Act of 1991, § 107, 105 Stat. 1075, codified at [*1740 42 U.S.C. § 2000e-2\(m\)](#). Under this more forgiving standard, liability can sometimes follow even if sex *wasn't* a but-for cause of the employer's challenged decision. Still, because nothing in our analysis depends on the motivating factor test, we focus on the more traditional but-for causation standard that continues to afford a viable, if no longer exclusive, path to relief under Title VII. [§ 2000e-2\(a\)\(1\)](#).

As sweeping as even the but-for causation standard can be, Title VII does not concern itself with

everything that happens “because of” sex. The statute imposes liability on employers only when they “fail or refuse to hire,” “discharge,” “or otherwise ... discriminate against” someone because of a statutorily protected characteristic like sex. *Ibid.* The employers acknowledge that they discharged the plaintiffs in today's cases, but assert that the statute's list of verbs is qualified by the last item on it: “otherwise ... discriminate against.” By virtue of the word *otherwise*, the employers suggest, Title VII concerns itself not with every discharge, only with those discharges that involve discrimination.

Accepting this point, too, for argument's sake, the question becomes: What did “discriminate” mean in 1964? As it turns out, it meant then roughly what it means today: “To make a difference in treatment or favor (of one as compared with others).” Webster's New International Dictionary 745 (2d ed. 1954). To “discriminate against” a person, then, would seem to mean treating that individual worse than others who are similarly situated. In so-called “disparate treatment” cases like today's, this Court has also held that the difference in treatment based on sex must be intentional. So, taken together, an employer who intentionally treats a person worse because of sex—such as by firing the person for actions or attributes it would tolerate in an individual of another sex—discriminates against that person in violation of Title VII.

At first glance, another interpretation might seem possible. Discrimination sometimes involves “the act, practice, or an instance of discriminating categorically rather than individually.” Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary 326 (1975). On that understanding, the statute would require us to consider the employer's treatment of groups rather than individuals, to see how a policy affects one sex as a whole versus the other as a whole. That idea holds some intuitive appeal too. Maybe the law concerns itself simply with ensuring that employers don't treat women generally less favorably than they do men. So how can we tell which sense, individual or group, “discriminate” carries in Title VII?

The statute answers that question directly. It tells us three times—including immediately after the words “discriminate against”—that our focus should be on individuals, not groups: Employers may not “fail or refuse to hire or ... discharge any *individual*, or otherwise ... discriminate against any *individual* with respect to his compensation, terms, conditions, or privileges of employment, because of such *individual's*... sex.” And the meaning of “individual” was as uncontroversial in 1964 as it is today: “A particular being as distinguished from a class, species, or collection.” Webster's New International Dictionary, at 1267. Here, again, Congress could have written the law differently. It might have said that “it shall be an unlawful employment *1741 practice to prefer one sex to the other in hiring, firing, or the terms or conditions of employment.” It might have said that there should be no “sex discrimination,” perhaps implying a focus on differential treatment between the two sexes as groups. More narrowly still, it could have forbidden only “sexist policies” against women as a class. But, once again, that is not the law we have.

The consequences of the law's focus on individuals rather than groups are anything but academic. Suppose an employer fires a woman for refusing his sexual advances. It's no defense for the employer to note that, while he treated that individual woman worse than he would have treated a man, he gives preferential treatment to female employees overall. The employer is liable for treating *this* woman worse in part because of her sex. Nor is it a defense for an employer to say it discriminates against both men and women because of sex. This statute works to protect individuals of both sexes from discrimination, and does so equally. So an employer who fires a woman, Hannah, because she is insufficiently feminine and also fires a man, Bob, for being insufficiently masculine may treat men and women as groups more or less equally. But in *both* cases the employer fires an individual in part because of sex. Instead of avoiding Title VII exposure, this employer doubles it.

B

From the ordinary public meaning of the statute's language at the time of the law's adoption, a straightforward rule emerges: An employer violates Title VII when it intentionally fires an individual employee based in part on sex. It doesn't matter if other factors besides the plaintiff's sex contributed to the decision. And it doesn't matter if the employer treated women as a group the same when compared to men as a group. If the employer intentionally relies in part on an individual employee's sex when deciding to discharge the employee—put differently, if changing

the employee's sex would have yielded a different choice by the employer—a statutory violation has occurred. Title VII's message is “simple but momentous”: An individual employee's sex is “not relevant to the selection, evaluation, or compensation of employees.” [!\[\]\(50ba758255c5d7cec2761495a31c7c80_img.jpg\) *Price Waterhouse v. Hopkins*, 490 U.S. 228, 239, 109 S.Ct. 1775, 104 L.Ed.2d 268 \(1989\)](#) (plurality opinion).

The statute's message for our cases is equally simple and momentous: An individual's homosexuality or transgender status is not relevant to employment decisions. That's because it is impossible to discriminate against a person for being homosexual or transgender without discriminating against that individual based on sex. Consider, for example, an employer with two employees, both of whom are attracted to men. The two individuals are, to the employer's mind, materially identical in all respects, except that one is a man and the other a woman. If the employer fires the male employee for no reason other than the fact he is attracted to men, the employer discriminates against him for traits or actions it tolerates in his female colleague. Put differently, the employer intentionally singles out an employee to fire based in part on the employee's sex, and the affected employee's sex is a but-for cause of his discharge. Or take an employer who fires a transgender person who was identified as a male at birth but who now identifies as a female. If the employer retains an otherwise identical employee who was identified as female at birth, the employer intentionally penalizes a person identified as male at birth for traits or actions that it tolerates in an employee identified as female at birth. Again, the individual employee's sex plays an unmistakable ^{*1742} and impermissible role in the discharge decision.

That distinguishes these cases from countless others where Title VII has nothing to say. Take an employer who fires a female employee for tardiness or incompetence or simply supporting the wrong sports team. Assuming the employer would not have tolerated the same trait in a man, Title VII stands silent. But unlike any of these other traits or actions, homosexuality and transgender status are inextricably bound up with sex. Not because homosexuality or transgender status are related to sex in some vague sense or because discrimination on these bases has some disparate impact on one sex or another, but because to discriminate on these grounds requires an employer to intentionally treat individual employees differently because of their sex.

Nor does it matter that, when an employer treats one employee worse because of that individual's sex, other factors may contribute to the decision. Consider an employer with a policy of firing any woman he discovers to be a Yankees fan. Carrying out that rule because an employee is a woman *and* a fan of the Yankees is a firing “because of sex” if the employer would have tolerated the same allegiance in a male employee. Likewise here. When an employer fires an employee because she is homosexual or transgender, two causal factors may be in play—*both* the individual's sex *and* something else (the sex to which the individual is attracted or with which the individual identifies). But Title VII doesn't care. If an employer would not have discharged an employee but for that individual's sex, the statute's causation standard is met, and liability may attach.

Reframing the additional causes in today's cases as additional intentions can do no more to insulate the employers from liability. Intentionally burning down a neighbor's house is arson, even if the perpetrator's ultimate intention (or motivation) is only to improve the view. No less, intentional discrimination based on sex violates Title VII, even if it is intended only as a means to achieving the employer's ultimate goal of discriminating against homosexual or transgender employees. There is simply no escaping the role intent plays here: Just as sex is necessarily a but-for *cause* when an employer discriminates against homosexual or transgender employees, an employer who discriminates on these grounds inescapably *intends* to rely on sex in its decisionmaking. Imagine an employer who has a policy of firing any employee known to be homosexual. The employer hosts an office holiday party and invites employees to bring their spouses. A model employee arrives and introduces a manager to Susan, the employee's wife. Will that employee be fired? If the policy works as the employer intends, the answer depends entirely on whether the model employee is a man or a woman. To be sure, that employer's ultimate goal might be to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation. But to achieve that purpose the employer must, along the way, intentionally treat an employee worse based in part on that individual's sex.

An employer musters no better a defense by responding that it is equally happy to fire male *and* female employees who are homosexual or transgender. Title VII liability is not limited to employers who, through the sum of all of their employment actions, treat the class of men

differently than the class of women. Instead, the law makes each instance of discriminating against an individual employee because of that individual's sex an independent violation of Title VII. So just as an employer who fires both Hannah and Bob for failing to fulfill traditional sex stereotypes doubles rather than eliminates Title 1743 VII liability, an employer who fires both Hannah and Bob for being gay or transgender does the same.

At bottom, these cases involve no more than the straightforward application of legal terms with plain and settled meanings. For an employer to discriminate against employees for being homosexual or transgender, the employer must intentionally discriminate against individual men and women in part because of sex. . . .

III

A

. . . . Suppose an employer's application form offered a single box to check if the applicant is either black or Catholic. If the employer refuses to hire anyone who checks that box, would we conclude the employer has complied with Title VII, so long as it studiously avoids learning any particular applicant's race or religion? Of course not: By intentionally setting out a rule that makes hiring turn on race or religion, the employer violates the law, whatever he might know or not know about individual applicants.

The same holds here. There is no way for an applicant to decide whether to check the homosexual or transgender box without considering sex. To see why, imagine an applicant doesn't know what the words homosexual or transgender mean. Then try writing out instructions for who should check the box without using the words man, woman, or sex (or some synonym). It can't be done. Likewise, there is no way an employer can discriminate against those who check the homosexual or transgender box without discriminating in part because of an applicant's sex. By discriminating against homosexuals, the employer intentionally penalizes men for being attracted to men and women for being attracted to women. By discriminating against transgender persons, the employer unavoidably discriminates against persons with one sex identified at birth and another today. Any way you slice it, the employer intentionally refuses to hire applicants in part because of the affected individuals' sex, even if it never learns any applicant's sex. . . .

B

Ultimately, the employers are forced to abandon the statutory text and precedent altogether and appeal to assumptions and policy. Most pointedly, they contend that few in 1964 would have expected Title VII to apply to discrimination against homosexual and transgender persons. And whatever the text and our precedent indicate, they say, shouldn't this fact cause us to pause before recognizing liability?

It might be tempting to reject this argument out of hand. This Court has explained many times over many years that, when the meaning of the statute's terms is plain, our job is at an end. The people are entitled to rely on the law as written, without fearing that courts might disregard its plain terms based on some extratextual consideration. Of course, some Members of this Court have consulted legislative history when interpreting *ambiguous* statutory language. But that has no bearing here. "Legislative history, for those who take it into account, is meant to clear up ambiguity, not create it." And as we have seen, no ambiguity exists about how Title VII's terms apply to the facts before us. To be sure, the statute's application in these cases reaches "beyond the principal evil" legislators may have intended or expected to address. But " 'the fact that [a statute] has been applied in situations not expressly anticipated by Congress' " does not demonstrate ambiguity; instead, it simply " 'demonstrates [the] breadth' " of a legislative command. And "it is ultimately the provisions of " those legislative commands "rather than the principal concerns of our legislators by which we are governed." . . .

Some of those who supported adding language to Title VII to ban sex discrimination may have hoped it would derail the entire Civil Rights Act. Yet, contrary to those intentions, the bill became law. Since then, Title VII's effects have unfolded with far-reaching consequences, some likely beyond what many in Congress or elsewhere expected.

But none of this helps decide today's cases. Ours is a society of written laws. Judges are not free to overlook plain statutory commands on the strength of nothing more than suppositions about intentions or guesswork about expectations. In Title VII, Congress adopted broad language making it illegal for an employer to rely on an employee's sex when deciding to fire that employee. We do not hesitate to recognize today a necessary consequence of that legislative choice: An employer who fires an individual merely for being gay or transgender defies the law.

Justice [ALITO](#), with whom Justice [THOMAS](#) joins, dissenting.

There is only one word for what the Court has done today: legislation. The document that the Court releases is in the form of a judicial opinion interpreting a statute, but that is deceptive.

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits employment discrimination on *1755 any of five specified grounds: “race, color, religion, sex, [and] national origin.” Neither “sexual orientation” nor “gender identity” appears on that list. For the past 45 years, bills have been introduced in Congress to add “sexual orientation” to the list, and in recent years, bills have included “gender identity” as well. But to date, none has passed both Houses.

Last year, the House of Representatives passed a bill that would amend Title VII by defining sex discrimination to include both “sexual orientation” and “gender identity,” H.R. 5, 116th Cong., 1st Sess. (2019), but the bill has stalled in the Senate. An alternative bill would add similar prohibitions but contains provisions to protect religious liberty. This bill remains before a House Subcommittee.

Because no such amendment of Title VII has been enacted in accordance with the requirements in the Constitution (passage in both Houses and presentment to the President, Art. I, § 7, cl. 2), Title VII's prohibition of discrimination because of “sex” still means what it has always meant. But the Court is not deterred by these constitutional niceties. Usurping the constitutional authority of the other branches, the Court has essentially taken H.R. 5's provision on employment discrimination and issued it under the guise of statutory interpretation. A more brazen abuse of our authority to interpret statutes is hard to recall.

The Court tries to convince readers that it is merely enforcing the terms of the statute, but that is preposterous. Even as understood today, the concept of discrimination because of “sex” is different from discrimination because of “sexual orientation” or “gender identity.” And in any event, our duty is to interpret statutory terms to “mean what they conveyed to reasonable people *at the time they were written.*” A. Scalia & B. Garner, *Reading Law: The Interpretation of Legal Texts* 16 (2012) (emphasis added). If every single living American had been surveyed in 1964, it would have been hard to find any who thought that discrimination because of sex meant discrimination because of sexual orientation—not to mention gender identity, a concept that was essentially unknown at the time.

The Court attempts to pass off its decision as the inevitable product of the textualist school of statutory interpretation championed by our late colleague Justice Scalia, but no one should be fooled. The Court's opinion is like a pirate ship. It sails under a textualist flag, but what it actually *1756 represents is a theory of statutory interpretation that Justice Scalia excoriated—the theory that courts should “update” old statutes so that they better reflect the current values of society. See A. Scalia, *A Matter of Interpretation* 22 (1997). If the Court finds it appropriate to adopt this theory, it should own up to what it is doing.

Many will applaud today's decision because they agree on policy grounds with the Court's updating of Title VII. But the question in these cases is not whether discrimination because of sexual orientation or gender identity *should be* outlawed. The question is *whether Congress did*

that in 1964.

It indisputably did not.

I

A

Title VII, as noted, prohibits discrimination “because of ... sex,” and in 1964, it was as clear as clear could be that this meant discrimination because of the genetic and anatomical characteristics that men and women have at the time of birth. Determined searching has not found a single dictionary from that time that defined “sex” to mean sexual orientation, gender identity, or “transgender status.” (Appendix A to this opinion includes the full definitions of “sex” in the unabridged dictionaries in use in the 1960s.)

In all those dictionaries, the primary definition of “sex” was essentially the same as that in the then-most recent edition of Webster’s New International Dictionary 2296 (def. 1) (2d ed. 1953): “[o]ne of the two divisions of organisms formed on the distinction of male and female.” See also American Heritage Dictionary 1187 (def. 1(a)) (1969) (“The property or quality by which organisms are classified according to their reproductive functions”); Random House Dictionary of the English Language 1307 (def. 1) (1966) (Random House Dictionary) (“the fact or character of being either male or female”); 9 Oxford English Dictionary 577 (def. 1) (1933) (“Either of the two divisions of organic beings distinguished as male and female respectively”).

The Court does not dispute that this is what “sex” means in Title VII If that is so, it should be perfectly clear that Title VII does not reach discrimination because of sexual orientation or gender identity. If “sex” in Title VII means biologically male or female, then discrimination because of sex means discrimination because the person in question is biologically male or biologically female, not because that person is sexually attracted to members of the same sex or identifies as a member of a particular gender.

How then does the Court claim to avoid that conclusion? The Court tries to cloud the issue by spending many pages discussing matters that are beside the point. The Court observes that a Title VII plaintiff need not show that “sex” was the sole or primary motive for a challenged employment decision or its sole or primary cause; that Title VII is limited to discrimination with respect to a list of specified actions (such as hiring, firing, etc.); and that Title VII protects individual rights, not group rights.

All that is true, but so what? In cases like those before us, a plaintiff must show that sex was a “motivating factor” in the challenged employment action, so the question we must decide comes down to this: if an individual employee or applicant for employment shows that his or her sexual orientation or gender identity was a “motivating factor” in a hiring or discharge decision, for example, is that enough to establish that the employer discriminated “because of ... sex”? Or, to put the same question in different terms, if an employer takes an employment action solely because of the sexual orientation or gender identity of an employee or applicant, has that employer necessarily discriminated because of biological sex?

The answers to those questions must be no, unless discrimination because of sexual orientation or gender identity inherently constitutes discrimination because of sex. The Court attempts to prove that point, and it argues, not merely that the terms of Title VII *can* be interpreted that way but that they *cannot reasonably be interpreted any other way*. According to the Court, the text is unambiguous.

The arrogance of this argument is breathtaking. As I will show, there is not a shred of evidence that any Member of Congress interpreted the statutory text that way when Title VII was enacted. But the Court apparently thinks that this was because the Members were not “smart enough to realize” what its language means. The Court seemingly has the same opinion about our colleagues on the Courts of Appeals, because until 2017, every single Court of Appeals to consider the question interpreted Title VII’s prohibition against sex discrimination to mean discrimination on

the basis of biological sex. And for good measure, the Court's conclusion that Title VII unambiguously reaches discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity necessarily means that the EEOC failed to see the obvious for the first 48 years after Title VII became law. Day in *1758 and day out, the Commission enforced Title VII but did not grasp what discrimination "because of ... sex" unambiguously means.

The Court's argument is not only arrogant, it is wrong. It fails on its own terms. "Sex," "sexual orientation," and "gender identity" are different concepts, as the Court concedes. And neither "sexual orientation" nor "gender identity" is tied to either of the two biological sexes. Both men and women may be attracted to members of the opposite sex, members of the same sex, or members of both sexes. And individuals who are born with the genes and organs of either biological sex may identify with a different gender.

Contrary to the Court's contention, discrimination because of sexual orientation or gender identity does not in and of itself entail discrimination because of sex. We can see this because it is quite possible for an employer to discriminate on those grounds without taking the sex of an individual applicant or employee into account. An employer can have a policy that says: "We do not hire gays, lesbians, or transgender individuals." And an employer can implement this policy without paying any attention to or even knowing the biological sex of gay, lesbian, and transgender applicants. In fact, at the time of the enactment of Title VII, the United States military had a blanket policy of refusing to enlist gays *1759 or lesbians, and under this policy for years thereafter, applicants for enlistment were required to complete a form that asked whether they were "homosexual."

At oral argument, the attorney representing the employees, a prominent professor of constitutional law, was asked if there would be discrimination because of sex if an employer with a blanket policy against hiring gays, lesbians, and transgender individuals implemented that policy without knowing the biological sex of any job applicants. Her candid answer was that this would "not" be sex discrimination. And she was right.

The attorney's concession was necessary, but it is fatal to the Court's interpretation, for if an employer discriminates against individual applicants or employees without even knowing whether they are male or female, it is impossible to argue that the employer intentionally discriminated because of sex. An employer cannot intentionally discriminate on the basis of a characteristic of which the employer has no knowledge. And if an employer does not violate Title VII by discriminating on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity without knowing the sex of the affected individuals, there is no reason why the same employer could not lawfully implement the same policy even if it knows the sex of these individuals. If an employer takes an adverse employment action for a perfectly legitimate reason—for example, because an employee stole company property—that action is not converted into sex discrimination simply because the employer knows the employee's sex. As explained, a disparate treatment case requires proof of intent—*i.e.*, that the employee's sex motivated the firing. In short, what this example shows is that discrimination because of sexual orientation or gender identity does not inherently or necessarily entail discrimination because of sex, and for that reason, the Court's chief argument collapses.

Trying to escape the consequences of the attorney's concession, the Court offers its own hypothetical:

"Suppose an employer's application form offered a single box to check if the applicant is either black or Catholic. If the employer refuses to hire anyone who checks that box, would we conclude the employer has complied with Title VII, so long as it studiously avoids learning any particular applicant's race or religion? Of course not."

How this hypothetical proves the Court's point is a mystery. A person who checked that box would presumably be black, Catholic, or both, and refusing to hire an applicant because of race or religion is prohibited by Title VII. Rejecting applicants who checked a box indicating that they are homosexual is entirely different because it is impossible to tell from that answer whether an applicant is male or female.

The Court follows this strange hypothetical with an even stranger argument. The Court argues

that an applicant could not answer the question whether he or she is homosexual without knowing something about sex. If the applicant was unfamiliar with the term “homosexual,” the applicant would have to look it up or ask what the term means. And because this applicant would have to take into account his or her sex and that of the persons to whom he or *1760 she is sexually attracted to answer the question, it follows, the Court reasons, that an employer could not reject this applicant without taking the applicant's sex into account.

This is illogical. Just because an applicant cannot say whether he or she is homosexual without knowing his or her own sex and that of the persons to whom the applicant is attracted, it does not follow that an employer cannot reject an applicant based on homosexuality without knowing the applicant's sex.

While the Court's imagined application form proves nothing, another hypothetical case offered by the Court is telling. But what it proves is not what the Court thinks. The Court posits:

“Imagine an employer who has a policy of firing any employee known to be homosexual. The employer hosts an office holiday party and invites employees to bring their spouses. A model employee arrives and introduces a manager to Susan, the employee's wife. Will that employee be fired? If the policy works as the employer intends, the answer depends entirely on whether the model employee is a man or a woman.”

This example disproves the Court's argument because it is perfectly clear that the employer's motivation in firing the female employee had nothing to do with that employee's sex. The employer presumably knew that this employee was a woman before she was invited to the fateful party. Yet the employer, far from holding her biological sex against her, rated her a “model employee.” At the party, the employer learned something new, her sexual orientation, and it was this new information that motivated her discharge. So this is another example showing that discrimination because of sexual orientation does not inherently involve discrimination because of sex.

In addition to the failed argument just discussed, the Court makes two other arguments, more or less in passing. The first of these is essentially that sexual orientation and gender identity are closely related to sex. The Court argues that sexual orientation and gender identity are “inextricably bound up with sex,” and that discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity involves the application of “sex-based rules.”

It is curious to see this argument in an opinion that purports to apply the purest and highest form of textualism because the argument effectively amends the statutory text. Title VII prohibits discrimination because of *sex itself*, not everything that is related to, based on, or defined with reference to, “sex.” Many things are related to sex. Think of all the nouns other than “orientation” that are commonly modified by the adjective “sexual.” Some examples yielded by a quick computer search are “sexual harassment,” “sexual assault,” “sexual violence,” “sexual intercourse,” and “sexual content.”

Does the Court really think that Title VII prohibits discrimination on all these grounds? Is it unlawful for an employer to refuse to hire an employee with a record of sexual harassment in prior jobs? Or a record of sexual assault or violence?

To be fair, the Court does not claim that Title VII prohibits discrimination because of *everything* that is related to sex. The Court draws a distinction between things that are “inextricably” related and those that are related in “some vague sense.” Apparently the Court would graft onto Title VII some arbitrary line separating the things that are related closely enough and those that are not. And it would do this in the name of high textualism. An additional argument made in passing also fights the text of Title VII and the policy it reflects. The Court proclaims that “[a]n individual's homosexuality or transgender status is not relevant to employment decisions.” That is the policy view of many people in 2020, and perhaps Congress would have amended Title VII to implement it if this Court had not intervened. But that is not the policy embodied in Title VII in its current form. Title VII prohibits discrimination based on five specified grounds, and neither sexual orientation nor gender identity is on the list. As long as an employer does not discriminate based

on one of the listed grounds, the employer is free to decide for itself which characteristics are “relevant to [its] employment decisions.” By proclaiming that sexual orientation and gender identity are “not relevant to employment decisions,” the Court updates Title VII to reflect what it regards as 2020 values.

The Court's remaining argument is based on a hypothetical that the Court finds instructive. In this hypothetical, an employer has two employees who are “attracted to men,” and “*to the employer's mind*” the two employees are “materially identical” except that one is a man and the other is a woman. The Court reasons that if the employer fires the man but not the woman, the employer is necessarily motivated by the man's biological sex. After all, if two employees are identical in every respect but sex, and the employer *1762 fires only one, what other reason could there be?

The problem with this argument is that the Court loads the dice. That is so because in the mind of an employer who does not want to employ individuals who are attracted to members of the same sex, these two employees are not materially identical in every respect but sex. On the contrary, they differ in another way that the employer thinks is quite material. And until Title VII is amended to add sexual orientation as a prohibited ground, this is a view that an employer is permitted to implement. As noted, other than prohibiting discrimination on any of five specified grounds, “race, color, religion, sex, [and] national origin.” Title VII allows employers to decide whether two employees are “materially identical.” Even idiosyncratic criteria are permitted; if an employer thinks that Scorpios make bad employees, the employer can refuse to hire Scorpios. Such a policy would be unfair and foolish, but under Title VII, it is permitted. And until Title VII is amended, so is a policy against employing gays, lesbians, or transgender individuals.

Once this is recognized, what we have in the Court's hypothetical case are two employees who differ in *two* ways—sex and sexual orientation—and if the employer fires one and keeps the other, all that can be inferred is that the employer was motivated either entirely by sexual orientation, entirely by sex, or in part by both. We cannot infer with any certainty, as the hypothetical is apparently meant to suggest, that the employer was motivated even in part by sex. The Court harps on the fact that under Title VII a prohibited ground need not be the sole motivation for an adverse employment action, but its example does not show that sex necessarily played *any* part in the employer's thinking.

The Court tries to avoid this inescapable conclusion by arguing that sex is really the only difference between the two employees. This is so, the Court maintains, because both employees “are attracted to men.” Of course, the employer would couch its objection to the man differently. It would say that its objection was his sexual orientation. So this may appear to leave us with a battle of labels. If the employer's objection to the male employee is characterized as attraction to men, it seems that he is just like the woman in all respects except sex and that the employer's disparate treatment must be based on that one difference. On the other hand, if the employer's objection is sexual orientation or homosexuality, the two employees differ in two respects, and it cannot be inferred that the disparate treatment was due even in part to sex.

The Court insists that its label is the right one, and that presumably is why it makes such a point of arguing that an employer cannot escape liability under Title VII by giving sex discrimination some other name. That is certainly true, but so is the opposite. Something that is *not* sex discrimination cannot be converted into sex discrimination by slapping on that label. So the Court cannot prove its point simply by labeling the employer's objection as “attract[ion] to men.” Rather, the Court needs to show that its label is the correct one.

And a labeling standoff would not help the Court because that would mean that the bare text of Title VII does not unambiguously show that its interpretation is right. The Court would have no justification for its stubborn refusal to look any further.

*1763 As it turns out, however, there is no standoff. It can easily be shown that the employer's real objection is not “attract[ion] to men” but homosexual orientation.

In an effort to prove its point, the Court carefully includes in its example just two employees, a homosexual man and a heterosexual woman, but suppose we add two more individuals, a woman

who is attracted to women and a man who is attracted to women. (A large employer will likely have applicants and employees who fall into all four categories, and a small employer can potentially have all four as well.) We now have the four exemplars listed below, with the discharged employees crossed out:

~~Man attracted to men~~

Woman attracted to men

~~Woman attracted to women~~

Man attracted to women

The discharged employees have one thing in common. It is not biological sex, attraction to men, or attraction to women. It is attraction to members of their own sex—in a word, sexual orientation. And that, we can infer, is the employer's real motive.

In sum, the Court's textual arguments fail on their own terms. The Court tries to prove that “it is impossible to discriminate against a person for being homosexual or transgender without discriminating against that individual based on sex,” but as has been shown, it is entirely possible for an employer to do just that. “[H]omosexuality and transgender status are distinct concepts from sex,” and discrimination because of sexual orientation or transgender status does not inherently or necessarily constitute discrimination because of sex. The Court's arguments are squarely contrary to the statutory text.

But even if the words of Title VII did not definitively refute the Court's interpretation, that would not justify the Court's refusal to consider alternative interpretations. The Court's excuse for ignoring everything other than the bare statutory text is that the text is unambiguous and therefore no one can reasonably interpret the text in any way other than the Court does. Unless the Court has met that high standard, it has no justification for its blinkered approach. And to say that the Court's interpretation is the only possible reading is indefensible. . . .

II

A

So far, I have not looked beyond dictionary definitions of “sex,” but textualists like Justice Scalia do not confine their inquiry to the scrutiny of dictionaries. Dictionary definitions are valuable because they are evidence of what people at the time of a statute's enactment would have understood its words to mean. *Ibid.* But they are not the only source of relevant evidence, and what matters in the end is the answer to the question that the evidence is gathered to resolve: How would the terms of a statute have been understood by ordinary people at the time of enactment?

Justice Scalia was perfectly clear on this point. The words of a law, he insisted, “mean *what they conveyed to reasonable people at the time.*” Reading Law, at 16 (emphasis added). . . .

[W]hen textualism is properly understood, it calls for an examination of the social context in which a statute was enacted because this may have an important bearing on what its words were understood to mean at the time of enactment. Textualists do not read statutes as if they were messages picked up by a powerful radio telescope from a distant and utterly unknown civilization. Statutes consist of communications between members of a particular linguistic community, one that existed in a particular place and at a particular time, and these communications must therefore be interpreted as they were understood by that community at that time.

For this reason, it is imperative to consider how Americans in 1964 would have understood Title VII's prohibition of discrimination because of sex. To get a picture of this, we may imagine this scene. Suppose that, while Title VII was under consideration in Congress, a group of average Americans decided to read the text of the bill with the aim of writing or calling their

representatives in Congress and conveying their approval or disapproval. What would these ordinary citizens have taken “discrimination because of sex” to mean? Would they have thought that this language prohibited discrimination because of sexual orientation or gender identity?

B

The answer could not be clearer. In 1964, ordinary Americans reading the text of Title VII would not have dreamed that discrimination because of sex meant discrimination because of sexual orientation, much less gender identity. The *ordinary meaning* of discrimination because of “sex” was discrimination because of a person’s biological sex, not sexual orientation or gender identity. The possibility that discrimination on either of these grounds might fit within some exotic understanding of sex discrimination would not have crossed their minds.

1

In 1964, the concept of prohibiting discrimination “because of sex” was no novelty. *1768 It was a familiar and well-understood concept, and what it meant was equal treatment for men and women.

Long before Title VII was adopted, many pioneering state and federal laws had used language substantively indistinguishable from Title VII’s critical phrase, “discrimination because of sex.” . . . In short, the concept of discrimination “because of,” “on account of,” or “on the basis of” sex was well understood. It was part of the campaign for equality that had been waged by women’s rights advocates for more than a century, and what it meant was equal treatment for men and women.

2

Discrimination “because of sex” was not understood as having anything to do with discrimination because of sexual orientation or transgender status. Any such notion would have clashed in spectacular fashion with the societal norms of the day.

For most 21st-century Americans, it is painful to be reminded of the way our society once treated gays and lesbians, but any honest effort to understand what the terms of Title VII were understood to mean when enacted must take into account the societal norms of that time. And the plain truth is that in 1964 homosexuality was thought to be a mental disorder, and homosexual conduct was regarded as morally culpable and worthy of punishment. . . .

To its credit, our society has now come to recognize the injustice of past practices, and this recognition provides the impetus to “update” Title VII. But that is not our job. Our duty is to understand what the terms of Title VII were understood to mean when enacted, and in doing so, we must take into account the societal norms of that time. We must therefore ask *1772 whether ordinary Americans in 1964 would have thought that discrimination because of “sex” carried some exotic meaning under which private-sector employers would be prohibited from engaging in a practice that represented the official policy of the Federal Government with respect to its own employees. We must ask whether Americans at that time would have thought that Title VII banned discrimination against an employee for engaging in conduct that Congress had made a felony and a ground for civil commitment.

The questions answer themselves. Even if discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity could be squeezed into some arcane understanding of sex discrimination, the context in which Title VII was enacted would tell us that this is not what the statute’s terms were understood to mean at that time. To paraphrase something Justice Scalia once wrote, “our job is not to scavenge the world of English usage to discover whether there is any possible meaning” of discrimination because of sex that might be broad enough to encompass discrimination because of sexual orientation or gender identity. Without strong evidence to the contrary (and there is none here), our job is to ascertain and apply the “*ordinary meaning*” of the statute. And in 1964, ordinary Americans most certainly would not have understood Title VII to ban discrimination because of sexual orientation or gender identity. . . .

C

While Americans in 1964 would have been shocked to learn that Congress had enacted a law prohibiting sexual orientation discrimination, they would have been bewildered to hear that this law also forbids discrimination on the basis of “transgender status” or “gender identity,” terms that would have left people at the time scratching their heads. The term “transgender” is said to have been coined “‘in the early 1970s,’ ” and the term “gender identity,” now understood to mean “[a]n internal sense of being male, female or something else,” apparently first appeared in an academic article in 1964. Certainly, neither term was in common parlance; indeed, dictionaries of the time *1773 still primarily defined the word “gender” by reference to grammatical classifications.

While it is likely true that there have always been individuals who experience what is now termed “gender [dysphoria](#),” *i.e.*, “[d]iscomfort or distress related to an incongruence between an individual’s gender identity and the gender assigned at birth,” the current understanding of the concept postdates the enactment of Title VII. . . .

The first widely publicized sex reassignment surgeries in the United States were not performed until 1966, and the great majority of physicians surveyed in 1969 thought that an individual who sought sex reassignment surgery was either “‘severely neurotic’ ” or “‘psychotic.’ ”

It defies belief to suggest that the public meaning of discrimination because of sex in 1964 encompassed discrimination on the basis of a concept that was essentially unknown to the public at that time. . . .

III

A

Because the opinion of the Court flies a textualist flag, I have taken pains to show that it cannot be defended on textualist grounds. But even if the Court’s textualist argument were stronger, that would not explain today’s decision. Many Justices of this Court, both past and present, have not espoused or practiced a method of statutory interpretation that is limited to the analysis of statutory text. Instead, when there is ambiguity in the terms of a statute, they have found it appropriate to look to other evidence of “congressional intent,” including legislative history.

So, why in these cases are congressional intent and the legislative history of Title VII totally ignored? Any assessment of congressional intent or legislative history seriously undermines the Court’s interpretation. . . .

C

. . . . The Court observes that “[t]he people are entitled to rely on the law as written, without fearing that courts might disregard its plain terms,” but it has no qualms about disregarding over 50 years of uniform judicial interpretation of Title VII’s plain text. Rather, the Court makes the jaw-dropping statement that its decision exemplifies “judicial humility.” Is it humble to maintain, not only that Congress did not understand the terms it enacted in 1964, but that all the Circuit Judges on all the pre-2017 cases could not see what the phrase discrimination “because of sex” really means? If today’s decision is humble, it is sobering to imagine what the Court might do if it decided to be bold.

IV

What the Court has done today—interpreting discrimination because of “sex” to encompass discrimination because of sexual orientation or gender identity—is virtually certain to have far-reaching consequences. Over 100 federal statutes prohibit discrimination because of sex. The

briefs in these cases have called to our attention the potential effects that the Court's reasoning may have under some of these laws, but the Court waves those considerations aside. As to Title VII itself, the Court dismisses questions about “bathrooms, locker rooms, or anything else of the kind.” And it declines to say anything about other statutes whose terms mirror Title VII's.

The Court's brusque refusal to consider the consequences of its reasoning is irresponsible. If the Court had allowed the legislative process to take its course, Congress would have had the opportunity to consider competing interests and might have found a way of accommodating at least some of them. In addition, Congress might have crafted special rules for some of the relevant statutes. But by intervening and proclaiming categorically that employment discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity is simply a form of discrimination because of sex, the Court has greatly impeded—and perhaps effectively ended—any chance of a bargained legislative resolution. Before issuing today's radical decision, the Court should have given some thought to where its decision would lead.

As the briefing in these cases has warned, the position that the Court now adopts will threaten freedom of religion, freedom of speech, and personal privacy and safety. No one should think that the Court's decision represents an unalloyed victory for individual liberty. . . .

Although the Court does not want to think about the consequences of its decision, we will not be able to avoid those issues for long. The entire Federal Judiciary will be mired for years in disputes about the reach of the Court's reasoning.

* * *

The updating desire to which the Court succumbs no doubt arises from humane and generous impulses. Today, many *1784 Americans know individuals who are gay, lesbian, or transgender and want them to be treated with the dignity, consideration, and fairness that everyone deserves. But the authority of this Court is limited to saying what the law *is*.

The Court itself recognizes this:

“The place to make new legislation ... lies in Congress. When it comes to statutory interpretation, our role is limited to applying the law's demands as faithfully as we can in the cases that come before us.”

It is easy to utter such words. If only the Court would live by them.

I respectfully dissent.

Justice [KAVANAUGH](#), dissenting.

Like many cases in this Court, this case boils down to one fundamental question: Who decides? Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits employment discrimination “because of ” an individual's “race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.” The question here is whether Title VII should be expanded to prohibit employment discrimination because of sexual orientation. Under the Constitution's separation of powers, the responsibility to amend Title VII belongs to Congress and the President in the legislative process, not to this Court. . . .

I

Title VII makes it unlawful for employers to discriminate because of “race, color, religion, sex, or national origin.” As enacted in 1964, Title VII did not prohibit other forms of employment discrimination, such as age discrimination, disability discrimination, or sexual orientation discrimination.

Over time, Congress has enacted new employment discrimination laws. . . .

Because judges interpret the law as written, not as they might wish it were written, the first 10 U.S. Courts of Appeals to consider whether Title VII prohibits sexual orientation discrimination

all said no. Some 30 federal judges considered the question. All 30 judges said no, based on the text of the statute. 30 out of 30.

But in the last few years, a new theory has emerged. To end-run the bedrock separation-of-powers principle that courts may not unilaterally rewrite statutes, the plaintiffs here (and, recently, two Courts of Appeals) have advanced a novel and creative argument. They contend that discrimination “because of sexual orientation” and discrimination “because of sex” are actually not separate categories of discrimination after all. Instead, the theory goes, discrimination because of sexual orientation always qualifies as discrimination because of sex: When a gay man is fired because he is gay, he is fired because he is attracted to men, even though a similarly situated woman would not be fired just because she is attracted to men. According to this theory, it follows that the man has been fired, at least as a literal matter, because of his sex.

Under this literalist approach, sexual orientation discrimination automatically qualifies as sex discrimination, and Title VII’s prohibition against sex discrimination therefore also prohibits sexual orientation discrimination—and actually has done so since 1964, unbeknownst to everyone. Surprisingly, the Court today buys into this approach.

For the sake of argument, I will assume that firing someone because of their sexual orientation may, as a very literal matter, entail making a distinction based on sex. But to prevail in this case with their literalist approach, the plaintiffs must *also* establish one of two other points. The plaintiffs must establish that courts, when interpreting a statute, adhere to literal meaning rather than ordinary meaning. Or alternatively, the plaintiffs must establish that the ordinary meaning of “discriminate because of sex”—not just the literal meaning—encompasses sexual orientation discrimination. The plaintiffs fall short on both counts.

First, courts must follow ordinary meaning, not literal meaning. And courts must adhere to the ordinary meaning of phrases, not just the meaning of the words in a phrase. . . .

Judges adhere to ordinary meaning for two main reasons: rule of law and democratic accountability. A society governed by the rule of law must have laws that are known and understandable to the citizenry. And judicial adherence to ordinary meaning facilitates the democratic accountability of America’s elected representatives for the laws they enact. Citizens and legislators must be able to ascertain the law by reading the words of the statute. Both the rule of law and democratic accountability badly suffer when a court adopts a hidden or obscure interpretation of the law, and not its ordinary meaning. . . .

Next is a critical point of emphasis in this case. The difference between literal and ordinary meaning becomes especially important when—as in this case—judges consider *phrases* in statutes. (Recall that the shorthand version of the phrase at issue here is “discriminate because of sex.”) Courts must heed the ordinary meaning of the *phrase as a whole*, not just the meaning of the words in the phrase. That is because a phrase may have a more precise or confined meaning than the literal meaning of the individual words in the phrase. Examples abound. An “American flag” could literally encompass a flag made in America, but in common parlance it denotes the Stars and Stripes. A “three-pointer” could literally include a field goal in football, but in common parlance, it is a shot from behind the arc in basketball. A “cold war” could literally mean any wintertime war, but in common parlance it signifies a conflict short of open warfare. A “washing machine” could literally refer to any machine used for washing any item, but in everyday speech it means a machine for washing clothes. . . .

Justice Scalia explained the extraordinary importance of hewing to the ordinary meaning of a phrase: “Adhering to the *fair meaning* of the text (the textualist’s touchstone) does not limit one to the hyperliteral meaning of each word in the text. In the words of Learned Hand: ‘a sterile literalism . . . loses sight of the forest for the trees.’ The full body of a text contains implications that can alter the literal meaning of individual words.” A. Scalia & B. Garner, *Reading Law* 356 (2012)

. . . .

If the usual evidence indicates that a statutory phrase bears an ordinary meaning different from the literal strung-together definitions of the individual words in the phrase, we may not ignore or gloss over that discrepancy. “Legislation cannot sensibly be interpreted by stringing together

dictionary synonyms of each word and proclaiming that, if the right example of the meaning of each is selected, the ‘plain meaning’ of the statute leads to a particular result. No theory of interpretation, including textualism itself, is premised on such an approach.” [883 F.3d 100, 144, n. 7 \(CA2 2018\)](#) (Lynch, J., dissenting).⁴

⁴ Another longstanding canon of statutory interpretation—the absurdity canon—similarly reflects the law’s focus on ordinary meaning rather than literal meaning. That canon tells courts to avoid construing a statute in a way that would lead to absurd consequences. The absurdity canon, properly understood, is “an implementation of (rather than ... an exception to) the ordinary meaning rule.” W. Eskridge, *Interpreting Law 72* (2016). “What the rule of absurdity seeks to do is what all rules of interpretation seek to do: *make sense of the text.*” A. Scalia & B. Garner, *Reading Law 235* (2012).

In other words, this Court’s precedents and longstanding principles of statutory interpretation teach a clear lesson: Do not simply split statutory phrases into their component words, look up each in a dictionary, and then mechanically put them together again, as the majority opinion today mistakenly does. To reiterate Justice Scalia’s caution, that approach misses the forest for the trees.

*1828 A literalist approach to interpreting phrases disrespects ordinary meaning and deprives the citizenry of fair notice of what the law is. It destabilizes the rule of law and thwarts democratic accountability. For phrases as well as terms, the “linchpin of statutory interpretation is *ordinary meaning*, for that is going to be most accessible to the citizenry desirous of following the law *and* to the legislators and their staffs drafting the legal terms of the plans launched by statutes *and* to the administrators and judges implementing the statutory plan.”

Bottom line: Statutory Interpretation 101 instructs courts to follow ordinary meaning, not literal meaning, and to adhere to the ordinary meaning of phrases, not just the meaning of the words in a phrase.

Second, in light of the bedrock principle that we must adhere to the ordinary meaning of a phrase, the question in this case boils down to the ordinary meaning of the phrase “discriminate because of sex.” Does the ordinary meaning of that phrase encompass discrimination because of sexual orientation? The answer is plainly no.

On occasion, it can be difficult for judges to assess ordinary meaning. Not here. Both common parlance and common legal usage treat sex discrimination and sexual orientation discrimination as two distinct categories of discrimination—back in 1964 and still today. . . .

Importantly, an overwhelming body of federal law reflects and reinforces the ordinary meaning and demonstrates that sexual orientation discrimination is distinct from, and not a form of, sex discrimination. Since enacting Title VII in 1964, Congress has *never* treated sexual orientation discrimination the same as, or as a form of, sex discrimination. Instead, Congress has consistently treated sex discrimination and sexual orientation discrimination as legally distinct categories of discrimination.

Many federal statutes prohibit sex discrimination, and many federal statutes also prohibit sexual orientation discrimination. But those sexual orientation statutes expressly prohibit sexual orientation discrimination in addition to expressly prohibiting sex discrimination. *Every single one*. To this day, Congress has never defined sex discrimination to encompass sexual orientation discrimination. Instead, when Congress wants to prohibit sexual orientation discrimination in addition to sex discrimination, Congress explicitly refers to sexual orientation discrimination.

That longstanding and widespread congressional practice matters. When interpreting statutes, as the Court has often said, we “usually presume differences in language” convey “differences in meaning.” [Wisconsin Central, 585 U.S., at ----, 138S.Ct., at 2071](#) (internal quotation marks omitted). When Congress chooses distinct phrases to accomplish distinct purposes, and does so over and over again for decades, we may not lightly toss aside all of Congress’s careful handiwork. As Justice Scalia explained for the Court, “it is not our function” to “treat alike subjects that different Congresses have chosen to treat differently.” [West Virginia Univ. Hospitals, Inc. v.](#)

[Casey, 499 U.S. 83, 101, 111 S.Ct. 1138, 113 L.Ed.2d 68 \(1991\)](#); see [id.](#), at 92, 111 S.Ct. 1138. . .

In short, an extensive body of federal law both reflects and reinforces the widespread understanding that sexual orientation discrimination is distinct from, and not a form of, sex discrimination. . . .

To tie it all together, the plaintiffs have only two routes to succeed here. Either they can say that literal meaning overrides ordinary meaning when the two conflict. Or they can say that the ordinary meaning of the phrase “discriminate because of sex” encompasses sexual orientation discrimination. But the first flouts long-settled principles of statutory interpretation. And the second contradicts the widespread ordinary use of the English language in America.

II

. . . . I have the greatest, and unyielding, respect for my colleagues and for their good faith. But when this Court usurps the role of Congress, as it does today, the public understandably becomes confused about who the policymakers really are in our system of separated powers, and inevitably becomes cynical about the oft-repeated aspiration that judges base their decisions on law rather than on personal preference. The best way for judges to demonstrate that we are deciding cases based on the ordinary meaning of the law is to walk the walk, even in the hard cases when we might prefer a different policy outcome.

* * *

In judicially rewriting Title VII, the Court today cashiers an ongoing legislative process, at a time when a new law to prohibit sexual orientation discrimination was probably close at hand. . . . [T]he implications of this Court's usurpation of*1837 the legislative process will likely reverberate in unpredictable ways for years to come. . . .

Under the Constitution's separation of powers, I believe that it was Congress's role, not this Court's, to amend Title VII. I therefore must respectfully dissent from the Court's judgment.