How Not to Challenge the Court

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Congress should have known better, so should the Clinton White House. By requiring a compelling justification for governmental conduct burdensome of religion and thereby "overturning" Employment Division v. Smith,¹ Congress and the White House—through the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA)²—backed the Court into a corner. Specifically, because RFRA called for "the most demanding test known to constitutional law,"³ Congress limited the Court's role in defining the parameters of First Amendment religious liberty protections to clarifying ambiguous language in RFRA, rather than actually interpreting the Constitution. Adding insult to injury, lawmakers condemned the Court for its "disastrous,"⁴ "dastardly and unprovoked,"⁵ "devastating"⁶ "degradation,"⁷ if not "virtual elimination,"⁸ of religious liberty protections. For his part, President Clinton, invoked "the power of God," and voiced his conviction that RFRA "was far more consistent with the intent of the Founders of this Nation than the [Smith] decision."⁹

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7. Id. at H2361 (statement of Rep. Orton).
8. Id. at H2359 (statement of Rep. Nadler).
City of Boerne v. Flores,10 invalidating RFRA, was the natural and inevitable result of these bad words. Citing Marbury v. Madison,11 the Court in Flores declared that “[t]he power to interpret the Constitution in a case or controversy remains in the Judiciary.”12 Moreover, by telling Congress that “[o]ur national experience teaches that the Constitution is preserved best when each part of the government respects both the Constitution and the proper actions and determinations of the other branches,”13 the Court fought fire with fire.

Or did it? Notwithstanding its apparent equation of Court interpretations of the Constitution with the Constitution itself, Flores suggests that elected officials and interest groups may find less draconian outlets to vent their frustration with the Court. In particular, well aware that Congress—through its Fourteenth Amendment, Section 5 (“Section 5”) enforcement power—may sometimes remedy unconstitutional state and federal action by “correcting” Court decisions, Flores’s chief, if not only, complaint with RFRA was that the statute operated as a naked power grab, transferring from the Court to Congress the power to define constitutional standards of review. In this way, Flores does little more than reaffirm the core holding of Marbury v. Madison, that is, judicial review is necessary to ensure that the Constitution not be “on a level with ordinary legislative acts . . . alterable when the legislature shall please to alter it.”14 Indeed, unwilling to squelch future democratic challenges to Smith, Flores does not establish any meaningful rules governing the reaches and limits of Congress’s power to “correct” Court decisions.15

Flores’s fuzziness exemplifies the Rehnquist Court’s increasing tendency to choose standards that allow for discretionary application instead of absolutist rules.16 When it comes to the bal-

11. 5 U.S. (1 Cranch) 137 (1803).
12. Flores, 117 S. Ct. at 2166.
13. Id. at 2172. Under this formalistic vision, “the Court will treat its precedents with the respect due them,” id., for each branch is obligated to “act within[] its sphere of power and responsibilities.” Id. at 2171.
14. Id. at 2168 (quoting Marbury v. Madison, 5 U.S. (1 Cranch) 137, 177 (1803)).
15. See infra notes 71-77 and accompanying text.
16. On this point, see generally Kathleen Sullivan, Foreword: The Justices of Rules and Standards, 106 HARV. L. REV. 22 (1992) (discussing the preference of the cur-
ance of powers, as I will argue here, standard-based decision making is appropriate.\textsuperscript{17} Inflexible rules prevent the branches from engaging in ongoing dialogues over the Constitution's meaning—dialogues that often result in more vibrant and durable constitutional interpretation. For this reason, the Court should have struck down RFRA. Rather than encourage dialogue over the meaning of the Constitution's religious liberty protection, RFRA sought to silence the Supreme Court.

Ironically, \textit{Flores} is open to criticism on these very grounds. Despite its recognition that Congress can sometimes correct errant Supreme Court decisions,\textsuperscript{18} \textit{Flores} props up an unworkable formalistic model. The Court, for example, never acknowledged that disagreement with its rulings by lawmakers, government officials, and interest groups often plays a pivotal and salutary role in defining constitutional values. Over time, however, \textit{Flores}'s suggestion that the Court's constitutional interpretations are definitive and final will give way to those social and political forces that prompted RFRA's enactment in the first place. Time and again, the Court has bended in the face of sustained popular resistance to its decision making.\textsuperscript{19} In this way, the \textit{Smith-RFRA-Flores} saga is simply the opening volley in what promises to be an ongoing and, ultimately, productive dialogue about the meaning of First Amendment religious liberty protections.

\section{I. The Realpolitik of \textit{City of Boerne v. Flores}}

In critical respects, \textit{Flores} reads like a high school civics lesson. The Court began and ended its analysis with \textit{Marbury v.}
Madison, reminding Congress and the nation that, "[u]nder our Constitution . . . the 'powers of the legislature are defined and limited'"\textsuperscript{20} and that the "courts retain the power . . . to determine if Congress has exceeded its authority."\textsuperscript{21} Without blinking, Flores derived from Marbury that Court decisions are sacrosanct and that Congress's role is limited to "mak[ing] its own informed judgment on the meaning and force of the Constitution . . . in the first instance," that is, before the Court has spoken.\textsuperscript{22} When the Court has acted, popular government's role in affecting constitutional change is limited to "the difficult and detailed amendment process."\textsuperscript{23}

This suggestion, of course, is nonsense. The historical record provides overwhelming evidence that other parts of government regularly challenge the Court's constitutional reasoning, and that the Court is influenced by these challenges as well as the broader social currents which surround it.\textsuperscript{24} As Ruth Bader Ginsburg noted a year before her appointment to the Supreme Court, judges "play an interdependent part in our democracy. They do not alone shape legal doctrine[,] . . . they participate in a dialogue with other organs of government, and with the people as well."\textsuperscript{25} More striking, Anthony Kennedy, in direct conflict with his opinion for the Court in Flores, told Congress at his confirmation hearing that they "would be fulfilling [their] duty" by limiting the effects of Supreme Court decisions that they believe are "wrong under the Constitution."\textsuperscript{26}

Kennedy's conflicted view of the relationship between Congress and the Court is not without explanation. Flores is em-

\textsuperscript{20} Flores, 117 S. Ct. at 2162 (quoting Marbury v. Madison, 5 U.S. (1 Cranch) 137, 176 (1803)).
\textsuperscript{21} Id. at 2172.
\textsuperscript{22} Id. at 2171-72.
\textsuperscript{23} Id. at 2168.
\textsuperscript{24} For in depth analysis of influences that shape the court's constitutional interpretation see generally NEAL DEVINS, SHAPING CONSTITUTIONAL VALUES (1996); LOUIS FISHER, CONSTITUTIONAL DIALOGUES (1988); LOUIS FISHER & NEAL DEVINS, POLITICAL DYNAMICS OF CONSTITUTIONAL LAW (2d ed. 1996).
\textsuperscript{26} Nomination of Anthony M. Kennedy to be Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States: Hearings Before the Senate Comm. on the Judiciary, 100th Cong. 223 (1987) (statement of Anthony Kennedy, Supreme Court nominee).
blematic of the Supreme Court's practice of depicting itself as having the final word on the Constitution's meaning when the Court feels especially challenged by the other branches. For instance, when *Marbury* declared that "[i]t is emphatically the province and duty of the judicial department to say what the law is," Jeffersonians in Congress—through the threat of impeachment and the elimination of judgeships—sought to neuter the Federalist-dominated judiciary. *Cooper v. Aaron* is much the same. *Cooper's* claim that "the federal judiciary is supreme in the exposition of the law of the Constitution" was made in the face of massive Southern resistance to *Brown v. Board of Education,* including Arkansas's enlistment of the national guard to deny African American schoolchildren access to Little Rock's Central High School. For the Rehnquist Court, *Planned Parenthood v. Casey,* its 1992 decision reaffirming the "central holding" of *Roe v. Wade,* nicely illustrates this phenomenon.

Decided in the midst of legislative deliberation on RFRA, *Casey* underscores the Court's belief that it must resist political challenges to its independence. Refusing to bend to the stated desires of the presidents who appointed them and overrule *Roe* "under political fire," Justices Sandra Day O'Connor, Anthony Kennedy, and David Souter "call[ed] the contending sides of a national controversy to end their national division by accepting" the Court's decision in *Casey.* Correspondingly, in acknowl-

30. Id. at 18.
32. See Fisher & Devins, supra note 24, at 242-56.
34. 410 U.S. 113 (1973).
35. Casey, 505 U.S. at 853.
36. Id. at 867.
37. Id. The *Casey* plurality waxed poetic suggesting that if the character and legitimacy of the Court suffered, then the character and legitimacy of our Nation would suffer because the American people's identity was "not readily separate from their understanding of the Court [as an institution] invested with the authority to decide their constitutional cases and speak before all others on constitutional ideals." Id. at 868.
edging that the Court lacked the power of the purse and sword and that its authority therefore resided "in its legitimacy, a product of substance and perception that shows itself in the people's acceptance of the Judiciary,"\(^{38}\) the \textit{Casey} plurality concluded that a surrender to political pressure would result in "profound and unnecessary damage" both to the Court and to "the Nation's commitment to the rule of law."\(^{39}\) In other words, as psychologists Tom Tyler and Gregory Mitchell observed, the Court seems to believe that "public acceptance of the Court's role as interpreter of the Constitution—that is, the public belief in the Court's institutional legitimacy—enhances public acceptance of controversial Court decisions."\(^{40}\)

Notwithstanding intense congressional, presidential, and religious interest and involvement in the abortion dispute, the lessons of \textit{Casey} were lost on the drafters of RFRA. Profoundly upset by the Court's limitation of religious liberty protections to governmental conduct that targets religion, RFRA supporters failed to heed \textit{Casey}'s implicit warning about the Court's sensitivity to political challenges to its authority. Instead, RFRA supporters invested no energy in casting their handiwork as anything but the de jure nullification of the Supreme Court's voice in religious liberty decision making. Making no meaningful attempt to reconcile RFRA's "compelling justification\(^{41}\) standard with the Court's standards governing Congress's Section 5 enforcement power,\(^{42}\) RFRA's legislative history can only be

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38. \textit{Id.} at 865.
39. \textit{Id.} at 869.
41. 42 U.S.C. § 2000bb(a) (1994); \textit{see infra} note 42.
understood as a direct challenge to the Court's basic authority to say "what the law is."\footnote{33}

Let me explain. RFRA, as an initial matter, must be understood against the backdrop of Employment Division v. Smith,\footnote{34} a decision that speaks more to the judicial role in overseeing democratic institutions than it does to the substantive meaning of religious liberty.\footnote{35} Proclaiming that "it is horrible to contemplate that federal judges will regularly balance against the importance of general laws the significance of religious practice,"\footnote{36} the Smith Court acknowledged that its test would place religious minorities at the mercy of the political process but that discriminatory treatment was an "unavoidable consequence of democratic government."\footnote{37} With that said, the Court seemed confident that religious interests would fare well in the political marketplace, noting that "[society] can be expected to be solicitous [of religious liberty] in its legislation" and citing, as "not surpris-


\footnote{33}{Marbury v. Madison, 5 U.S. (1 Cranch) 137, 177 (1803). At oral arguments, Douglas Laycock defended RFRA by stating that the statute was "not such a dramatic power grab. The power of interpreting compelling interest remains in [the Supreme Court]." Transcript of Oral Argument, City of Boerne v. Flores, 117 S. Ct. 2157 (No. 95-2074), available in 1997 WL 87109, at *42 (Feb. 19, 1997) [hereinafter Flores Transcript]. Moreover, suggesting that in cases of purposeful discrimination "there are sometimes advantages to the litigant in proceeding under the free exercise claim," Laycock argued that, notwithstanding RFRA, the Smith doctrine was not a dead letter. \textit{Id.} at *43. Although I doubt the correctness of these claims, RFRA can be understood as a frontal assault on the Court without disputing either of these claims. More than anything, my point is about the message that Congress sent the Court. Professor Laycock's oral argument, instead, reveals that Congress could have portrayed RFRA as something short of the over-turning of Smith. See infra notes 64-69 and accompanying text.}

\footnote{34}{494 U.S. 872 (1990).}


\footnote{36}{\textit{Smith}, 494 U.S. at 889 n.5. In this way RFRA's embrace of strict scrutiny review gave the Justices an instruction they literally could not handle.}

\footnote{37}{\textit{Id.} at 890.}
"ing," numerous religious-practice exemptions.\textsuperscript{48} 

\textit{Smith}'s institutional concerns did not factor into RFRA's enactment. Rather than view decisions like \textit{Smith} and \textit{Casey} as emblematic of the Rehnquist Court's interest in both defining and defending its conception of the judicial role in government,\textsuperscript{49} the RFRA lobby did little to hide its disdain for the Court. Immediately following the Court's decision in \textit{Smith}, the litigation director for Concerned Women of America remarked that the same conservative Justices that "all the Christians were shouting 'hurray' about when Reagan picked them... were all the people who stabbed us in the back on this thing."\textsuperscript{50} This highly personal, highly incendiary rhetoric typified much of Congress's consideration of RFRA.

Congressional hearings showcased representatives from an "unprecedented coalition" of religious and other interest groups.\textsuperscript{51} With few exceptions, congressional testimony followed this general format: an outline of the history of religious freedom in America; Supreme Court precedent for the application of the compelling interest standard in free exercise cases; a direct attack on the logic of \textit{Smith} (almost universally condemning the Court's use of the word "luxury" to describe how the compelling interest requirement benefits religious liberty plaintiffs); a prediction about or description of decisions that may or did result from the \textit{Smith} standard; and a demand for a return to the freedom our nation has always cherished.\textsuperscript{52} Very few of the witnesses challenged the legislation, and nearly all of the witnesses attacked \textit{Smith}, often by demanding that Congress overturn the decision. Illustrative of the hearings were the comments of three

\textsuperscript{48} Id.
\textsuperscript{50} High Court Urged to Reconsider, WASH. POST, May 12, 1990, at C11.
members of the "Coalition for the Free Exercise of Religion": for Robert Dugan, Jr., representing the National Association of Evangelicals, Smith "deprived us of our birthright as Americans" and must be "overrule[d];" for Dallin H. Oaks, from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (the Mormon Church), the statutory specification of a compelling interest standard was "a legitimate and a necessary response by the legislative branch to the degradation of religious freedom resulting from the Smith case;" and for Oliver S. Thomas, general counsel of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, Smith was the "Dred Scott of first amendment law."

Lawmakers read from a nearly identical script, routinely condemning Smith and calling upon their colleagues to reverse it. Lawmakers and the White House also paid homage to RFRA's interest group sponsors, applauding the Coalition for the Free Exercise of Religion, one of the broadest coalitions ever assembled to support a bill before Congress, for spanning "ideological and religious lines." Correspondingly, with no meaningful interest group resistance, constitutional roadblocks were not placed in front of RFRA, and, as such, Congress barely touched upon the question of whether the Supreme Court would approve of RFRA. For example, Congress did not engage in the type of fact finding that would place RFRA within the ambit of the Court's, admittedly murky, Section 5 precedent. Congress did not make specific findings of fact "that formally neutral, generally applicable laws have historically been instruments of religious persecution, that enacting separate religious exemptions in every statute is not a workable means of protecting religious liber-

53. Hearings, supra note 45, at 10, 14 (statement of Mr. Dugan).
54. Id. at 25 (statement of Mr. Oaks).
56. For a sampling of lawmaker comments, see supra notes 4-8 and accompanying text. Lawmakers, however, paid scant attention to the pre-Smith Court's failure to vigorously apply strict scrutiny review in religious liberty cases. See Eisgruber & Sager, supra note 42, at 495-97.
ty, and that litigation about governmental motives is not a workable means of protecting religious liberty." Instead, Congress was content to do precisely what RFRA's interest group sponsors asked for, that is, repudiate Smith as inconsistent with the Framers' intent through legislation that would not protect neutral laws that burdened religion.

The Supreme Court had no choice but to view RFRA as a frontal assault on its authority. For starters, Congress's power to correct the Court through positive law invariably raises profound questions about the appropriate balance of authority between the judiciary and democratic government. These institutional concerns, moreover, figured prominently in Smith. RFRA's doctrinal context therefore sensitized the Court to judicial independence concerns.

With its antenna already up, the scope and legislative history of RFRA, quite appropriately, pushed the Court over the edge. In particular, RFRA's embrace of strict scrutiny review effectively limited the judicial role to the application of the statutory compelling justification test. More significant, no matter how

59. See Hearings, supra note 45, at 331 (testimony of Prof. Douglas Laycock). Congress, of course, could have made these factual findings without pursuing these matters at legislative hearings. It did not, despite being advised that such fact finding would strengthen RFRA's constitutionality. See 42 U.S.C. §§ 2000bb(a) (1994).

60. See 42 U.S.C. § 2000bb(a) (1994). Indeed, rather than reinstate the status quo at the time of Smith, RFRA provided for greater protection of religious liberty than the Court did at the time of Smith or, for that matter, any other time. See Eisgruber & Sager, supra note 42 at 445-52.


63. The fact that RFRA imposed huge costs on state and local governments by requiring them to satisfy strict review whenever their conduct burdened religion, added to this sensitivity. See Steven G. Calabresi, A Constitutional Revolution, WALL ST. J., July 10, 1997, at A14.

64. In responding to Douglas Laycock's claim that the Court preserves its "judicial independence" through its interpretation of RFRA, Chief Justice Rehnquist re-
its proponents dressed it, the legislative history of RFRA smelled, looked, and tasted like a populist abrogation of the judicial function.\textsuperscript{65} The story of RFRA features accusations of judicial incompetence and insensitivity;\textsuperscript{66} congressional hearings that, for the most part, operated as a special-interest lovefest,\textsuperscript{67} repeated assertions that RFRA overturned, not supplemented, Supreme Court decision making;\textsuperscript{68} and congressional disinterest in finding facts that would suggest RFRA corrected, rather than overruled, \textit{Smith}.\textsuperscript{69}

The Court could not ignore this legislative history, especially when confronted with a statute as sweeping as RFRA.\textsuperscript{70} Congress, the White House, and interest groups challenged the Court's credibility and authority. Put on the defensive, as it was in \textit{Casey}, the Court used \textit{Flores} to emphasize first principles and

marked "if we're faithful to our oaths we've got to say, we're looking at what Congress meant by this. . . . [T]hat's not nearly the same thing as having, as \textit{Marbury} said, the final word on what the Constitution means." \textit{Flores} Transcript, \textit{supra} note 43, at *41. More precisely, because RFRA adopts "the most demanding test known to constitutional law," \textit{City of Boerne v. Flores}, 117 S. Ct. 2157, 2171 (1997), it is impossible for the Court to reinvigorate constitutionally-based religious liberty decision making by, for example, holding that \textit{Smith} is constitutionally in firm.

\textsuperscript{65} No doubt, as RFRA's defenders' claim, floor debates did address the statute's constitutionality and congressional hearings featured some constitutional scholars, at least two of whom discussed the circumstances under which the Supreme Court might uphold RFRA. See Robin-Verger, \textit{supra} note 42, at 608-12. It is also true that both the Senate and House Reports, despite acknowledging that the purpose of RFRA was to "overturn" \textit{Smith}, concluded ipse dixit that RFRA was "a new statutory prohibition" that "[d]id not purport to legislate the standard of review to be applied" in constitutional litigation. S. REP. No. 103-111, \textit{reprinted in} 1993 U.S.C.C.A.N. 1892-1912, at 14 n.43, 19 (1993); accord H.R. REP. No. 103-88, at 6-7, 14 (1993). Notwithstanding Congress's consideration of RFRA's constitutionality, there is very little in the statute's legislative history to signal to the Court that democratic government seriously considered the Court's decisions and its status as a coequal branch. See S. REP. No. 103-111, at 5-7 (discussing \textit{Smith} and its impact).

\textsuperscript{66} See \textit{supra} notes 4-8 and accompanying text.

\textsuperscript{67} See S. REP. No. 103-111, at 2 (listing the members of the pro-RFRA organizations that testified before the Committee).

\textsuperscript{68} See \textit{id.} at 8-9, 12, 14.

\textsuperscript{69} See \textit{supra} notes 59-60 and accompanying text.

\textsuperscript{70} It is also noteworthy that RFRA spawned countless law review articles, most of which challenged its constitutionality. Without overstating the importance of this scholarly "culture of expectations" to the Supreme Court's decision making, there is some reason to think that legal academics can have a conditioning influence on the Court. See Lawrence Marshall, \textit{Intellectual Feasts and Intellectual Responsibility}, 84 NW. U. L. REV. 832, 842-50 (1990).
to lecture the nation on the importance of judicial independence to the "rule of law."

Flores, although decisive in its invalidation of RFRA, sheds little light on congressional authority to correct Supreme Court decisions. Concluding that Congress's Section 5 power is limited to "[l]egislation which deters or remedies constitutional violations," but acknowledging that "the line between measures that remedy or prevent unconstitutional actions and measures that make a substantive change in the governing law is not easy to discern," Flores settled on an extraordinarily amorphous standard: Is there a "congruence and proportionality between the injury to be prevented or remedied and the means adopted to that end?" By choosing "[a]gainst [t]heories, [a]gainst [r]ules" and focusing "their attention only on what is necessary to decide" the case before them, Flores allows the Court to pick and choose the Section 5 battles it will fight with Congress. Moreover, recognizing that "Congress must have wide latitude in determining" whether its corrective legislation is, in fact, remedial, Flores acknowledged Congress's power to engage the Court in constitutional dialogues.


72. Flores, 117 S. Ct. at 2163.

73. Id. at 2164.

74. Id. at 2163. RFRA is an easy case, even under this nebulous standard. Congress's objectives are patently nonremedial. "[RFRA] appears, instead, to attempt a substantive change in constitutional protections." Id. at 2170.


76. Flores, 117 S. Ct. at 2164.

77. For example, nothing in Flores suggested that the Court will question the legality of Congress's repudiation of City of Mobile v. Bolden, 446 U.S. 55 (1980), in which the Court required proof of discriminatory intent as a basis for voting rights litigation. Recognizing, among other things, that the combination of at-large election schemes and racial block voting will disenfranchise racial minorities, Congress—as part of its 1982 amendments to the Voting Rights Act—concluded that the "intent test focuses on the wrong question and places an unacceptable burden upon plain-
Flores’s recognition that Congress will, on occasion, correct the Court is quite consistent with its strong words about the judicial function. The Justices, for the most part, understand that they cannot definitively settle divisive political controversies. To suggest otherwise, that is, for the Court to declare itself the “ultimate interpreter” of the Constitution, and mean it, is an obvious invitation to disaster. Court packing, court stripping, impeachment, and general disregard of unpopular decision making might well follow in the wake of a Court that sees its authority over the Constitution as second to none. For this reason, although the Justices will, up to a point, suffer fools on the Hill, the Court must resist direct challenges to its institutional independence. Citations to Marbury v. Madison and intimations of judicial supremacy in Cooper v. Aaron, the Nixon

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tapes case,82 and Planned Parenthood v. Casey83 are classic examples of this phenomenon.

So is Flores. The Court protects its turf without forbidding subsequent entreaties. Moreover, because its proportionality test is so fluid, the Court can pay close attention to the circumstances surrounding future congressional invocations of Section 5. For a Court seeking to preserve its status in the government, Flores is an eminently sensible and predictable decision.

II. SHAPING CONSTITUTIONAL VALUES

Flores's balancing act is more than predictable. By defending its institutional authority while allowing for future populist challenges to its decision making, the Court in Flores recognized—albeit grudgingly—the centrality of vigorous interchanges between the Court, elected government, and the public in shaping constitutional values. RFRA, in contrast, was an outright repudiation of the judicial function. The Court, relegated to interpreting congressionally specified standards, no longer had a voice in defining the content of First Amendment religious liberty protections. Unlike mechanisms designed to prompt the Court to reconsider Smith, say, the appointment of Supreme Court nominees who may well disagree with the decision or the enactment of legislation exempting specific religious practices,84 RFRA's slash and burn approach to dialogues between the Court and elected government promotes acrimony between the branches and little else.

RFRA's failings are about more than the technical preservation of three discrete branches of government. Judges and politi-

cians sometimes react differently to social and political forces. Congress, for example, focuses its "energy mostly on the claims of large populous interests, or on the claims of the wealthy and the powerful, since that tends to be the best route to re-election." Courts, in contrast, are less affected by these pressures, for judges possess life tenure. Accordingly, because special interest group pressures affect courts and elected officials in different ways, a government-wide decision-making process encourages a full-ranging consideration of the costs and benefits of different policy outcomes. For this reason, both courts and elected officials should be activists in shaping government policy.

This politicization of constitutional discourse, while contributing to partisan value-laden constitutional analysis, is better than the alternatives—legislative or judicial supremacy. Legislative supremacy, as Flores recognized, would blur the line separating the Constitution from ordinary laws. Moreover, subject to the pressures of reelection, "legislatures are too likely to get caught up in the passions of the moment, be they flag burning, alleged communists in the State Department, or the need to really sock it to various types of criminal defendants." For progressives and conservatives alike, lawmakers' propensity to do that which is politically expedient makes legislative supremacy unpalatable.

Judicial exclusivity, like legislative supremacy, creates more problems than it solves. "When technologies are changing rapidly, when facts or values are unclear and when democracy is in a state of moral flux, courts [with limited fact finding capacity and inability to respond quickly to changing circumstances] should recognize that they may not have the best or final answers." Moreover, lacking the powers of purse and sword, as Casey rec-

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ognized, the Court's authority is necessarily tied to "the people's acceptance of the Judiciary." The Court is well aware of this; for example, in explaining the extraordinary importance of public opinion in its decision making, Justice Owen Roberts, whose alleged "switch in time" saved the *Lochner* Court from Roosevelt's Court-packing plan, acknowledged that "[l]ooking back, it is difficult to see how the Court could have resisted the popular urge for uniform standards throughout the country." Popular acceptance of the Court then, cannot be divorced from social and political pressures. Otherwise, democratic institutions and the public at large will reject the Court and, in so doing, diminish its stature.

To be sure, those who believe that Congress is not "ideologically committed or institutionally suited to search for the meaning of constitutional values" may question the practicality of this dynamic decision-making model. Populist constitutional interpretation, however, serves as an important foil for the Court. Ever since Thomas Jefferson declared the Alien and Sedition Act, which criminalized speech critical of the government, a constitutional "nullity" and pardoned everyone convicted under it, the executive and legislative branches have limited the effects of Court rulings, more often than not by providing for greater individual rights protection than the judiciary.

92. For a thoughtful, provocative treatment of the nexus between Court-packing and the Court's doctrinal transformation, see Barry Cushman, *Rethinking the New Deal Court*, 80 VA. L. REV. 201 (1994).
94. See Devins & Fisher, supra note 79 (manuscript at 161, on file with author).
Democratic attempts to limit *Smith* are much the same. "Given the breadth of support for RFRA both within and outside of Congress, it would be difficult to imagine a piece of congressional legislation that could more powerfully demonstrate a societal consensus concerning the meaning of a constitutional provision." While RFRA went too far—taking this consensus and shoving it down the Justices' throats—a moderation of *Smith*’s cramped view of religious liberty may well be in order. Over time, as was true with legislative and executive challenges to the Alien and Sedition Act, the Court may conclude that *Smith* has been invalidated by "the court of history."99

The prospect of the Court backing away from *Smith* in the face of popular resistance is anything but disquieting. "[O]ur ability to combine active democracy, constitutional principles, and judicial judgment"100 rejects the notion of an ultimate constitutional interpreter in favor of a dynamic process. Contrary to suggestions that judicial supremacy is necessary to stave off "interpretive anarchy,"101 social and political forces outside the courts help make the Constitution more relevant, more vital. Bickel described the courts as engaged in a "continuing colloquy" with political institutions and society at large, a process in which constitutional principle is "evolved conversationally not perfected unilaterally."102

Balance-of-powers disputes, in particular, are best resolved through this process of give-and-take between the branches. "[T]he success of a shift in formal powers from one branch or institution to another depends ultimately on how easily the other branches, as well as the public at large, may be able to respond through formal and informal venues to the change."103 This repeat player aspect to separation-of-powers disputes dis-

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98. Conkle, *supra* note 42, at 89.
tistinguishes them from many traditional challenges because the branches are forced over time to react to and make accommodations with each other. For this reason, when it comes to Congress's Section 5 authority to correct the Supreme Court, there are great benefits to a fluid decision-making rule. *Flores* serves up such a rule and, as such, facilitates constitutional dialogues between the courts and elected government.

*Flores* is far from perfect, however. In defending its institutional turf, the Court in *Flores* embraced a formalistic vision of the separation of powers. Through repeated citations to *Marbury*, the Court claimed that each branch must act "within its sphere of power and responsibilities" and that "[t]he power to interpret the Constitution in a case or controversy remains in the Judiciary." Moreover, concluding that the Court must resist "the political branches of the Government [when they] act against the backdrop of a judicial interpretation of the Constitution already issued," *Flores* sounds like a paean to judicial supremacy. To be sure, placed alongside *Flores*'s modest, indeterminate holding, this sweeping rhetoric seems, more than anything, a statement of the Court's sensitivity to those social and political forces which engulf it. Nonetheless, this formalistic rhetoric is disquieting. It suggests an institutional compartmentalization that is overly parochial, ultimately shortsighted, and factually inaccurate.

"There is a magnetic attraction to the notion of an ultimate constitutional interpreter," wrote Walter Murphy, "just as there is a magnetic pull of some passkey to constitutional interpretation that will, if properly turned, always open the door to truth, justice, and the American way." But just as finality "is not the language of politics," constitutional decision making is a never-ending process. The ongoing struggle between the Court

105. *Id.* at 2171.
106. *Id.* at 2166. This suggestion, that *Marbury* supports judicial supremacy, is bogus. *See Fisher & Devins*, supra note 24, at 10-12, 17-18, 25-35.
109. *Id.* (quoting Benjamin Disraeli).
and Congress over the meaning of religious liberty reveals this basic truth of our system of government. *Flores's* holding, if not its rhetoric, recognizes the necessity of this interactive process.

III. CONCLUSION: WHAT'S NEXT

Congress, the White House, and interest groups were justified in expressing their disagreement with *Smith*. Nevertheless, democratic challenges to *Smith* fell short. By repeatedly and unhesitatingly proclaiming their authority to "undo" Court efforts to limit First Amendment protections of governmental conduct that targeted religion, Congress and the White House sought to beat the Court into submission, but not to engage it in a dialogue about religious liberty protections. Although conversations between the courts and elected government can be sharp, even bitter, RFRA was not about conversations, and as such, *Flores* was as correct as it was inevitable.

From RFRA's ashes, a constructive conversation between the courts and democratic government may emerge.110 Admitting that the Justices had good reason to view RFRA as "encroaching on the Court's domain," lawmakers and interest groups are turning their attention to "more narrowly written laws."111 For example, through its power of the purse, Congress can condition federal grants on state compliance with federal standards governing the protection of religious liberty.112 Congress, moreover, could exempt specific religious practices from *Smith*, practices where the *Smith* standard cloaks pernicious discrimina-

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110. The focus of this section is federal governmental challenges to *Smith*. States, of course, are not bound by *Flores's* Section 5 analysis and, under *Smith*, are free to exempt religious practices from state law.
Correspondingly, the executive may seek to expand religious liberty protections through its powers to interpret statutes, launch regulatory initiatives, and file briefs before the Supreme Court. Congress and the White House, finally, may use the appointments and confirmation process to put Justices sympathetic to the rights of religious minorities on the Court.

What Congress ought not to do is engage the Court in a dogfight over its authority to strike down RFRA. Claims made by Senators Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.) and Orrin Hatch (R-Utah), that “[w]e cannot take this no’ [sic] from the Supreme Court,” and that the “Court has thrown down the gauntlet, and we intend to pick it up,” will incite, not engage, the Court. In contrast, by accepting Flores, lawmakers and interest groups may learn that the Court is willing to take part in a dialogue over both the reach of Smith and Congress’s power to counteract the decision. Unlike RFRA, this dialogue may allow all parts of government and the public to come together in crafting a mutually acceptable understanding of religious liberty. Although such constitutional decision making may seem unprincipled, it appropriately reflects a system, like ours, in which courts do not guard constitutional rights alone. “Courts,” as Justice Ginsburg rightly observed at her confirmation hearings, “share that profound responsibility with Congress, the President, the states, and the people.”

113. See City of Boerne v. Flores, 117 S. Ct. 2157, 2169 (1997) (suggesting that Congress may utilize its Section 5 power when its focus is “the object or purpose” of state conduct). It is unclear whether, under Flores, Congress could extend RFRA-like protections throughout the federal government. For an argument that Flores is limited to Congress’s power vis-à-vis the states, see Kent Greenawalt, Why Now Is Not the Time for Constitutional Amendment: The Limited Reach of City of Boerne v. Flores, 39 WM. & MARY L. REV. 689 (1998).


