THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE REMOVAL POWER

Ganesh Sitaraman

INTRODUCTION

In the years leading up to the 2008 financial crisis, financial institutions targeted communities of color with expensive and risky subprime mortgage products. Hundreds of thousands of Black and Hispanic families were charged more for mortgages than their white counterparts or steered into expensive subprime loans, even though they qualified for cheaper prime loans.1 Over time, financial institutions like Countrywide pushed these “toxic” loans on more and more homeowners and expanded subprime lending throughout the country.2 When the music finally stopped in 2008, millions of families lost their jobs and their homes, and nearly $11 trillion in household wealth was wiped out.3 Over the next two years, Congress would work to pass financial reform legislation that was designed to address a variety of risks and dangers in the financial markets.

In 2007, then-Professor Elizabeth Warren proposed a federal agency to regulate consumer financial products.4 For years, Warren had criticized predatory “tricks and traps” in mortgages, credit cards, and other financial products.5 One-off, piecemeal reforms had failed, and Americans were drowning in debt.6 Increasingly, one bad medical diagnosis or the loss of a job would mean bankruptcy and a family’s total

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3 Id. at xv.
5 See id.
6 See id.
economic devastation. Warren argued that other consumer products, like toasters, were regulated at the federal level. Financial products were not so different. By 2009, Congress and the President picked up Warren’s proposal, and they made it one of the central parts of the coming financial reform package.

That is when the opposition kicked into gear. For the next decade, opponents of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) waged an all-out war against the agency, dumping millions of dollars into efforts to stop the agency from coming into being. When they failed to prevent its creation, they switched gears to slow its functioning. And when the Trump Administration gained control of the CFPB, it began to dismantle the agency from the inside. As with the Affordable Care Act, this Obama Administration achievement faced a sustained and relentless assault on its very existence.

A reader of Seila Law LLC v. Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, however, would have little sense of the bruising, bare-knuckle, decade-long fight over the agency. Instead, the case presents itself as posing a relatively straightforward, albeit novel-on-the-facts, separation of powers question: Is it constitutional for Congress to create an agency headed by a single director who is insulated from presidential removal, except in cases of “inefficiency, neglect of duty, or malfeasance in office”?

A summary is simple: In 2017, the CFPB issued a demand for Seila Law LLC to produce information on its business practices, as part of the agency’s investigation of the law firm for violating telemarketing laws. Seila refused, arguing that the CFPB single-director structure with for-cause removal violated the separation of powers. The CFPB filed suit to enforce its demand. Writing for three Justices, with two others concurring in the judgment, Chief Justice Roberts agreed with Seila and found the agency’s design unconstitutional, in the process setting up a framework that appears to allow Congress to condition removal from office for members of multimember commissions but not for

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7 See id.
9 See infra section I.A, pp. 358–64.
10 See infra section I.C, pp. 371–73.
11 140 S. Ct. 2183 (2020).
12 Id. at 2193 (quoting 12 U.S.C. § 5491(c)(3) (2018)).
14 Id.
15 Id. By the time the case came to the Supreme Court, the Trump Administration had agreed with Seila on the merits of the constitutional question, so the Court appointed Paul Clement as amicus to argue the case for the CFPB’s constitutionality. See id. at 2195.
single-director agency heads. At the same time, the Chief Justice wrote for seven Justices that the CFPB’s for-cause removal restriction was severable from the rest of the statute and that it alone would be struck — leaving the agency in place but now with a presidential removal threat looming over its director.

Justice Kagan dissented from the constitutional analysis, along with the three other liberal Justices. In an opinion filled with sharp, cutting language, Justice Kagan protested that there was nothing neutral about the majority’s reasoning or its unitary executive theory of the separation of powers. She systematically argued that “constitutional text, history, and precedent invalidate[] the majority’s thesis.” Justice Kagan even accused the majority of “gerrymander[ing]” their “made up” rule to strike down the CFPB’s independent structure. For a separation of powers case, this was about as bloody a fight as it gets.

But why?

Seven Justices agreed that the CFPB can continue to regulate financial products, so long as its head is removable at will by the President. Seila, the law firm, is likely still subject to the investigatory demand because the Trump CFPB, now with a removable director, says it has ratified that demand. And Seila, the case, means that if Democratic nominee Joe Biden wins the White House in November, he can fire the Republican-appointed head of the CFPB and install a pro-regulatory appointee. Given that this was one of the marquee cases of the 2019 Term and that the decision broke 5–4 along ideological lines, these are hardly epochal consequences.

Supreme Court cases are often seen as “political” because the first-order effects of the decisions have self-evident political, partisan, or ideological consequences. Bush v. Gore chose a President. NFIB v. Sebelius could have overturned a President’s namesake healthcare initiative. This Term’s cases on abortion and the President’s taxes have obvious “political” valence. On an initial glance, Seila is different. The first-order consequences of the decision are not self-evidently political. The decision does not invalidate the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau as a whole or strip it of any substantive powers. It does not favor the Trump Administration, as President Trump already has his handpicked head of the CFPB in place. It does not favor Republican

16 See id. at 2199, 2201.
17 Id. at 2211.
18 Id. at 2240 (Kagan, J., concurring in part and dissenting in part).
19 Id. at 2225.
Presidents over Democratic ones in some more systematic way either: Presidents of either party could fire the head of the CFPB upon taking office and nominate a new one. Indeed, even if Seila is a step toward overturning removal conditions altogether — making commissions like the FTC and FCC less independent — it is not clear that the first-order effects of that rule are “political” either. Republican and Democratic Presidents alike might use their unitary executive power of removal to fire ideologically misaligned commissioners and choose ones more to their liking.

My aim in this Comment is to offer something of a Rashomon25 of Seila to try to explain why Seila was so hotly contested, why it is a marquee case, and why it might be considered a “political” decision — in spite of the symmetrical first-order effects and limited consequences for the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau.26 Throughout this Comment, I use the word “political” in different ways, in order to explore how a case can be “political” beyond obvious first-order electoral consequences (as in Bush v. Gore) or policy consequences (as with NFIB v. Sebelius).

The first story is of how Seila itself came to be. It is not entirely clear why Seila was brought to the Supreme Court. After the Court’s 2010 decision in Free Enterprise Fund v. Public Co. Accounting Oversight Board,27 it was predictable that the Court would likely hold that the remedy for an unconstitutional removal provision was simply to strike it and leave the agency in place. So why bring the case if recovery was unlikely? Part I provides the policy context for Seila, outlining the origins of the CFPB and the decade-long fight over its existence. This context shows how the financial industry, political leaders, and others deployed a variety of tactics and arguments to try to kill or weaken the consumer agency. Seila must be understood in this context. It did not simply arise, as the Court suggested, from novel legislative design. It was the culmination of a relentless antiregulatory oppositional campaign that began when Congress and the President took up Warren’s proposal — and that eventually turned into a constitutional battle.

The second story places Seila within the context of the rise of the unitary executive theory. Part II shows how the unitary theory went from virtually nonexistent in the 1970s to a major part of legal and scholarly debate by the 1990s and 2000s. Its rise was not so much a function of popular constitutionalism in the form of a social movement or public opinion as it was elite efforts. The unitary executive theory

25 RASHOMON (Minoru Jingo 1950) (depicting the same event through the perspectives of different characters).
26 This approach aligns with the law and political economy framework, which seeks to center issues of power, equality, and democracy rather than separating the market from politics. See generally Jedediah Britton-Purdy et al., Building a Law-and-Political-Economy Framework: Beyond the Twentieth-Century Synthesis, 120 YALE L.J. 1784 (2020).
gained steam through the initiative of conservative presidential administrations (Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush) and a systematic effort to articulate and defend the theory in legal scholarship. Chief Justice Roberts’s straightforward, briefly reasoned opinion in \textit{Seila} reflects the success of the conservative legal movement in making the theory plausible. Justice Kagan’s piercing dissent lays bare how contested this reasoning is. Taken together, the conservative push for a unitary executive and the battle between Chief Justice Roberts and Justice Kagan should leave readers with the sense that the case is “political” in a different sense.

The third story is one of values and consequences rather than historical context. Given that the first-order consequences of \textit{Seila} and of a presidential removal power are symmetrical for presidents of both political parties, are there “political” reasons why conservatives are so interested in the presidential removal power? And conversely, are there “political” reasons why liberals and progressives have been so opposed to it? The opinion in \textit{Seila} leaves traces of possible normative views of how the separation of powers should be enforced, which in turn point to some potentially larger ideological stakes. In addition, scholars often reference the rise of the removal power as a danger to the administrative state, but it is unclear precisely through what mechanism this operates, given the first-order symmetry of the rule itself. Part III canvasses these normative views and the mechanisms that might produce asymmetric consequences. It is admittedly a speculative enterprise, but to the extent any of these normative views or policy consequences ring true (and they may not, or may not for everyone), they further indicate why \textit{Seila} and the removal power should be considered deeply “political.”

\textbf{I. THE ASSAULT ON THE CONSUMER FINANCIAL PROTECTION BUREAU}

In her 2007 article first making the case for a federal agency to regulate consumer financial products, then-Professor Warren described how financial institutions had engaged in a variety of unfair and predatory practices.\textsuperscript{28} One-off regulatory solutions had not stopped lender kickbacks, product steering toward vulnerable communities, or tricks, traps, and obfuscation in financial agreements.\textsuperscript{29} Families were suffering as a result. Warren thus argued for the creation of a new agency, akin to the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), that would regulate mortgages and other financial products just like the CPSC regulates toasters and other consumer goods.\textsuperscript{30}

\textsuperscript{28} \textit{See} Warren, \textit{supra} note 4.
\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Id.}
\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Id.}
Warren offered the CPSC as an analogy, but her focus was not on whether there should be a single-director agency or a multimember commission. Rather, at that point, and throughout the fight to create the CFPB, she primarily wanted an agency that focused on products, rather than issuers, in order to prevent regulatory arbitrage; that would have a mission focused solely on consumer financial protection, rather than having multiple missions; and that would be strong and independent so it could evade industry capture. Importantly, she noted that the ultimate effect of sound regulation would be to improve markets. As with food, drugs, and other consumer products, trust in the safety of the product would make consumers more comfortable and markets more competitive.

The proposal immediately met with two reactions. The first was that it would be effective. A new agency with powers akin to other regulatory agencies could significantly improve the consumer financial product market. The other thing Warren was told: “Don’t do it.” “There is no possible way you can win,” people in Washington said, “because this is going to cost some big banks real money.” They cautioned her that the biggest banks would “sweep through this town with their lobbyists, and you will end up with nothing.” Instead, they advised her to ask for “bunches of little things, and maybe you will get one or two things.”

The warnings did not have their intended effect. Warren redoubled her efforts and began to mobilize support from as many groups and individuals as she could.

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31 Warren later commented that as the idea gained traction and she talked to experts about agency design, she quickly came to support a single-director structure. Elizabeth Warren, The Banking Industry’s Transparent Attempt to Weaken the CFPB, HUFFPOST (Oct. 20, 2016, 5:41 PM), https://www.huffpost.com/entry/banking-industries-attempt-weaken-cfpb_b_8340792 [https://perma.cc/R6M4-ARXB].


33 See Warren, supra note 4.

34 Id.


36 Id.

37 Id.

38 Id.

39 See id.
the NAACP, and others joined her, and together, they started to push for the agency.41

A. The Path to Passage

When the Obama Administration offered its outline for financial reform in 2009, financial institutions immediately identified “killing” the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau as their “top priority.”42 According to news reports, they vowed to fight the proposal “with everything they ha[d].”43 In September 2009, the Chamber of Commerce began a $2 million ad campaign opposing the reforms and even created a “Stop the CFPA” website.44 By March of 2010, with the CFPB having passed the House of Representatives and negotiations proceeding in the Senate, the Chamber announced it was “intensifying” its campaign against the CFPB.45 Its multimillion-dollar television, radio, online, and grassroots outreach effort had already generated nearly two hundred thousand letters to Congress.46 That year, the financial sector ended up spending $481.2 million dollars lobbying,47 and it made $346.7 million in campaign contributions in that year’s midterm elections.48 All in all, some three thousand lobbyists worked to kill or weaken parts of the Dodd-Frank bill — almost six lobbyists for every member of Congress.51

40 See id.
41 There are a number of excellent accounts of the passage of the Dodd-Frank Act from participants and journalists. ELIZABETH WARREN, A FIGHTING CHANCE (2014) offers Warren’s own account of her efforts to get the CFPB passed into law. ROBERT G. KAISER, ACT OF CONGRESS: HOW AMERICA’S ESSENTIAL INSTITUTION WORKS, AND HOW IT DOESN’T (2013) is a journalistic account that uses the Dodd-Frank Act as a lens through which to see how Congress functions.
43 Andrews, supra note 8.
44 Id.; see KAISER, supra note 41, at 127, 131, 134–36 (discussing the banking lobby’s immediate opposition to the agency).
46 Earlier in the legislative process, the agency was called the Consumer Financial Protection Agency, rather than Bureau. I refer to it throughout as Bureau or CFPB for simplicity.
48 Id.
Opponents of the CFPB recognized the unpopularity of advocating against consumer protection. After all, the proposal came in the wake of a historic economic crash that was rooted in practices designed to steer or trick consumers into expensive and risky financial products. As a lobbyist for the Financial Services Roundtable admitted in the summer of 2009, “the optics are bad.” Financial industry lobbyists and their allies did not argue that their bottom lines would suffer from regulation. Rather, they offered a variety of substantive arguments against the agency. These arguments can be grouped into three categories.

First were arguments denying the need for structural changes. Some opponents argued that weak consumer financial products had little to do with the crash. Regulation of any kind, let alone structural regulation, was therefore disconnected from the causes of the crisis. Others conceded the need for reforms but suggested instead “beefed-up” powers for existing regulatory agencies. Still others suggested placing a new office within the FDIC or creating a council of existing regulators. These arguments allowed opponents of the CFPB to claim the high ground in supporting regulation, while effectively minimizing change and keeping the existing (and flawed) structures in place.

The second category included technocratic consequentialist arguments. Arguments of this type were not actually a case against a new agency. They were a case against hypothetical regulations that might emerge from a new agency. Opponents of the new agency thus argued that it might harm small businesses and increase the costs of loans and other financial products. At one point in spring of 2010, they even

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52 See Andrews, supra note 8.
54 R. Christian Bruce, Regulatory Reform: Summers Urges Speed on Bank Reforms, Says Consumer Protection Agency Essential, 93 BANKING REP. (BNA) No. 10, at 506 (Sept. 22, 2009) (“The Consumer Bankers Association, the Financial Services Roundtable, and 23 other business groups said creating a stand-alone consumer protection agency with broad powers ‘is not the correct approach.’ Instead . . . existing regulatory agencies could be given beefed-up powers.”).
56 See U.S. Chamber of Com., supra note 47.
alleged that the CFPB would regulate orthodontists who offer payment plans for parents whose kids need braces.\(^5^9\) Still others claimed the proposal would create “a fragmented system of regulation,” even though it was designed to do the opposite.\(^6^0\) This mix of tradeoffs, misdirection, and fearmongering was common throughout 2009 and 2010, and it appeared to be designed at a minimum to shrink the scope of the CFPB’s authority — and at a maximum to sow the seeds of doubt among fence-sitters about the need for a new agency with a broad mandate.

The third category included structural consequentialist arguments.\(^6^1\) These usually came in two flavors, both with hefty libertarian impulses. The first was that a new agency would be a “paternalistic,” “elitist,” “financial nanny” that undermined freedom and individual liberty.\(^6^2\) The agency, these terrified opponents claimed, would “for the first time” ever in the history of the country prevent people from buying products and services that are not inherently dangerous.\(^6^3\) This was, of course, manifestly incorrect, as federal regulation has long restricted the sale of many kinds of products that are not inherently dangerous. The point, however, seems to have been to activate libertarian impulses toward individual freedom.

The second flavor were arguments that framed the agency as a tyrannical, authoritarian apparatus that had “unchecked powers and massive authority over the economy.”\(^6^4\) Senator Mike Enzi, for example, said that the agency would become the “single most powerful agency in

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\(^{6^0}\) U.S. Chamber of Com., supra note 47.


\(^{6^2}\) Wallison, Elitist Protection Consumers Don’t Need, supra note 62.

\(^{6^3}\) U.S. Chamber of Com., supra note 47. Language of this type is an example of what Professor Gillian Metzger has called “rhetorical anti-administrativism.” Gillian E. Metzger, The Supreme Court, 2016 Term — Foreword: 1930 Redux: The Administrative State Under Siege, 131 HARV. L. REV. 1, 34–38 (2017).
the Federal Government” and would exercise “unchecked power.” Claims of “unchecked power” were also manifestly incorrect. At a minimum, the proposed CFPB would have been subject to the Administrative Procedure Act’s requirements of notice-and-comment rulemaking and judicial review. The idea that the agency would somehow be the most powerful agency in the federal government was also far-fetched, to say the least. Competitors might include the Justice Department, which can prosecute and incarcerate; the Federal Reserve, which can crash the economy in setting monetary policy; and the Federal Trade Commission, whose powers include regulating “unfair or deceptive acts or practices in or affecting commerce” — a power much broader than the CFPB’s authority to address unfair and abusive practices related to a “consumer financial product or service.” The value of these arguments seems not to have been precision in the possible harms but the crafting of a libertarian, road-to-serfdom narrative of the slippery slope of governmental power. This narrative, like the broccoli argument in the adjacent health care debate, would ultimately migrate from public debate into the legal arena and take on a constitutional valence.

Importantly, so far as I can tell, at no time in the legislative debates did a member of Congress argue that the CFPB’s design was unconstitutional. Searching the House and Senate debates for references to the constitutionality or unconstitutionality of the CFPB turns up not a single reference. The debate over the agency — even with heated rhetoric that trended toward absurdity — was fundamentally political, economic, and ideological, not constitutional.

69 The individual mandate provision of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA) led critics to ask if there was anything to prevent the government from requiring that people purchase broccoli. For an explanation of the role of broccoli in the debate of the ACA, see Mark D. Rosen & Christopher W. Schmidt, Why Broccoli? Limiting Principles and Popular Constitutionalism in the Health Care Case, 61 UCLA L. REV. 66, 69 (2013); and NFIB v. Sebelius, 567 U.S. 519, 558, 608 (2012) (both Chief Justice Roberts’s majority opinion and Justice Ginsburg’s partial dissent address the broccoli hypothetical).
70 To determine whether there had been a discussion of constitutionality, Vanderbilt research librarian Meredith Capps undertook two searches. First: she looked at all the briefs in the case, in search of any reference to legislative history that would indicate a concern with constitutionality. Second: she searched the compiled legislative history record for the Dodd-Frank Act in ProQuest Legislative Insight for any reference to “unconstitutional,” “constitutional,” “separation of powers,” “humphrey’s,” “morrison,” “myers,” and “free enterprise fund.” In both cases she found no indication that there were constitutional concerns with the agency. I thank her greatly for her diligent work.
With these arguments in place, the debate was polarized from the start. Representative Barney Frank led the House effort to create the CFPB, and he supported a single-director agency from the beginning. But he initially lacked the votes for that design, so he adopted a commission structure. Every Republican on the Energy and Commerce Committee voted against the agency in committee and every Republican in the House of Representatives voted against the overall bill in the fall of 2009. One conservative commentator said that when it came to the House bill, “[t]he bad can be summed up in four words: Consumer Financial Protection Agency.”

The Senate took up the bill in the spring of 2010. “[T]he fighting was intense,” said former (and later) law professor Michael Barr, who was then heading up financial reform at the Treasury Department. There were fears that the publicly popular CFPB would not get a vote in the Senate because senators did not want to vote for it and anger the banks or vote against it and anger their constituents. Warren pushed hard for a clean, public vote on the agency, and she announced her intention to fight efforts to water down the agency into a fig leaf reform without serious authority. “My first choice is a strong consumer agency,” she said at the time. “My second choice is no agency at all and plenty of blood and teeth left on the floor.” And, she noted, “My 99th choice is some mouthful of mush that doesn’t get the job done.”

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72 H.R. 3126, 111th Cong. § 112 (2009); Letter from Barney Frank, supra note 71.


76 Rivlin, supra note 51.

77 WARREN, supra note 41, at 155–59.


79 Id.

80 Id.
two sides behind the legislative negotiations, *Rolling Stone* framed the fight as “Elizabeth Warren vs. Wall Street.”

Republicans in the Senate used all three arguments against the CFPB in combination, and they emphasized new ones as well. Senator Bob Corker, for example, worried that consumer protection would not be coordinated with financial stability and proposed creating a veto for CFPB rules. The American Bankers Association supported this position as a way to weaken the agency, even though it had opposed linking consumer protection and financial stability a mere four years earlier.

Back then, decoupling these functions had been proposed to strengthen consumer protection. Warren called out this hypocrisy as proof that the banks’ only consistent principle was opposition to regulation.

Navigating these political waters, Senator Chris Dodd, who was leading financial reform efforts in the Senate, adopted a variation on Corker’s proposal. The final Dodd bill involved a single-director agency located within the Federal Reserve, and it gave the Financial Stability Oversight Council a limited veto over some of the CFPB’s regulations, making the CFPB the only agency with such a check.

Some liberals worried the Dodd bill was too weak because of the inclusion of the veto provision. But even with the accommodation to Senator Corker, the CFPB’s creation remained “the most contentious issue” in

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82 Currie, *supra* note 53.


84 *Id.*

85 *Id.*

86 For a discussion of the Corker-Dodd negotiations and their failure, see KAISER, *supra* note 41, at 259–56.

87 S. 3217, 111th Cong. §§ 113(a)(1), 1011(a)–(b) (2010); see also JEFFREY M. STUPAK, CONG. RSCH. SERV., R45052, FINANCIAL STABILITY OVERSIGHT COUNCIL (FSOC): STRUCTURE AND ACTIVITIES 3 (2018) (explaining that because Section 113(a)(1) requires an affirmative vote from the Secretary to designate a nonbank as posing systemic risk, the FSOC chair has an effective veto); Mike Konczal, *The GOP Doesn’t Oppose Richard Cordray. It Opposes His Whole Agency*, WASH. POST (May 25, 2013, 2:33 PM), https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2013/05/25/the-gop-doesnt-oppose-richard-cordray-it-opposes-his-whole-agency [https://perma.cc/XFS7-DLEQ] (noting the veto power is “a feature that does not apply to any other regulator”).

the debate. According to Corker, the agency’s inclusion prevented any Republicans from agreeing to financial reform.

With the CFPB in the Dodd bill, Republicans proposed an amendment on the Senate floor — now to reduce the agency’s powers and place it within the FDIC. Warren observed that the “lobbyists’ closest friends in the Senate would like nothing better than passing an agency that has a good name but no real impact so they have something good to say to the voters — and something even better to say to the lobbyists.” Nonetheless, the consumer agency wouldn’t die. The last-ditch efforts to kill it failed. With Dodd’s bill having the votes to pass in the Senate, Frank immediately agreed to a single-director structure in conference committee, as it had always been his preference. President Obama signed the new Consumer Financial Protection Bureau into law on July 21, 2010.

B. Halftime

“Halftime.” That’s what the head lobbyist for the Financial Services Roundtable called it when the Dodd-Frank Act passed. The financial industry and Republicans understood that even though they had lost the first legislative battle, the war over financial regulation would continue in Congress, in the agencies, and ultimately, in the courts.

1. Money and Influence. — Financial institutions ramped up their lobbying efforts and campaign spending. In 2012, the financial industry spent $749 million on campaign contributions, shifting from a roughly even split funding both parties in prior cycles to spending almost seventy percent of their contributions on Republicans. That was on top of $490

90 Id. (describing Senator Corker’s view that the CFPB’s creation was “the elephant in the room” that prevented any bipartisan agreement on Dodd-Frank).
91 Wilmarth, supra note 65.
92 Nasiripour, supra note 78.
94 Letter from Barney Frank, supra note 71.
96 Rivlin, supra note 51.
million in lobbying expenses. To get a sense of the size and scope of the lobbying effort, consider this: in 2012, the top five consumer advocacy groups had twenty lobbyists in Washington. The top five financial industry groups had 406 — just about one per member of Congress. And those numbers undercount the extensive additional resources that financial industry lobbyists had at their disposal in the form of researchers, PR consultants, and regulatory lawyers. By the 2015–2016 cycle, the sector was spending more than $2 billion between contributions and lobbying — amounting to $2.7 million a day.

The consequences of these resource imbalances were real. Consumer groups had 116 meetings with regulatory agencies in the years after Dodd-Frank was passed; the top five commercial banks met with them 901 times. A study that looked into the relationship between money and policy found that members of Congress who voted for rolling back financial reforms got two to four times as much in campaign contributions from Wall Street PACs than did those who held the line and protected reform. At the time, Dennis Kelleher, the head of the financial reform group Better Markets, asked, “How do you compete when one side is this hydra-headed monster that can devote unlimited resources to killing, gutting or otherwise weakening financial reform?”

The fight against the CFPB continued in public as well. In 2015, the heads of six big trade associations — the American Bankers Association, American Land Title Association, Consumer Bankers Association, Credit Union National Association, Independent Community Bankers Association, and National Association of Federal Credit Unions — penned a joint op-ed again calling for restructuring the agency. A $500,000 television ad campaign, funded by a group whose board included lobbyists for the student loan giant Naviant (which was

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99 Rivlin, supra note 51.
100 Id.
102 Rivlin, supra note 51.
104 Rivlin, supra note 51.
sued by the CFPB), framed the agency as something from the authoritarian Soviet Union. In the ad, bureaucratic drones deny loan applications in a massive room, with giant red banners featuring the faces of by-then Senator Warren and then-Director Richard Cordray hanging in the background. In the eyes of opponents, the Director was a “politically biased regulatory dictator” (that was an industry op-ed in the Wall Street Journal). The agency’s textbook rulemaking powers amounted to “mak[ing] up laws as it goes along” and were “counter to the American system of limited government” (that was a commentator at the Heritage Foundation). The Republican Party platform in 2016 even declared that the CFPB was a “rogue agency” with “dictatorial powers.” Importantly, framing the fight as restructuring to prevent a “dictatorial” agency enabled opponents to avoid attacking the agency itself or its actions, both of which remained popular.

2. Confirmation Wars. — Republican senators also took the extraordinary action of preventing the agency from having a confirmed leader. Forty-four Republicans declared on May 5, 2011, that they would block the confirmation of any person as director of the CFPB until structural changes were enacted into law. “No Accountability, No Confirmation” was the headline adopted by Senator Richard Shelby’s office. Senator Shelby himself claimed, incorrectly, that the agency has “unfettered authority to regulate businesses that extend consumer credit.” By July, the Chamber of Commerce had produced a twenty-seven-page statement systematically arguing that the CFPB’s director would have “unprecedented unchecked power of extraordinary breadth” and calling for

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111 See McCoy, supra note 32, at 2568.


113 Id.

114 Id. (emphasis added).
structural reforms. The Chamber stopped short of calling the agency’s structure unconstitutional, but it sang a constitutional tune, referring to “checks and balances” eight times.

In the face of intransigent Republican opposition, President Obama chose not to nominate then-Professor Warren to run the CFPB in July 2011, and instead picked former Ohio Attorney General Richard Cordray with the hope he might pass muster with Republicans in the Senate. A few months later, in December 2011, Republicans used the threat of a filibuster to block Cordray’s nomination, citing once again their demands for structural reforms to the agency.

The confirmation battle over Cordray wasn’t important simply as a matter of political hardball. It was also a tactic to prevent the regulation of financial institutions. A legal opinion from the Treasury and Federal Reserve Inspectors General had concluded that without a confirmed head, the CFPB could not exercise its powers to conduct rulemakings under its new legal authorities; take action to prohibit unfair, deceptive, and abusive practices; or supervise nondepository financial institutions. In other words, the CFPB would not get its full powers without having a Senate-confirmed leader.

Playing political hardball himself, President Obama ultimately gave recess appointments to Cordray and three others in January 2012, leading to lawsuits and ultimately the Supreme Court’s decision in *NLRB v. Noel Canning* (which, like *Seila*, does not go into the fe-


116 See id. at 3, 5–7, 13, 27.


120 Professor Art Wilmarth has pointed out that restraining the CFPB in this way had the effect of benefitting non-banks vis-à-vis banks — and he has also shown that some bankers were willing to accept an unlevel playing field in order to prevent the CFPB from gaining its full powers. Wilmarth, *supra* note 65, at 897–99.


rocious political battles being waged between the branches and the economic stakes behind them).\textsuperscript{123} Only after Senate Democrats threatened to change the filibuster rules in July 2013 was Cordray finally confirmed.\textsuperscript{124}

3. New Legislation and Weaponized Oversight. — After Republicans captured the House of Representatives in 2010, they began a multi-year effort to weaken and roll back the agency’s authority, introducing new legislation and weaponizing their oversight powers.\textsuperscript{125} Almost immediately upon taking the House, Republicans introduced multiple pieces of legislation designed to make the CFPB a multimember commission, to strengthen the veto over the CFPB’s rulemakings, and to subject the agency to congressional appropriations rather than getting its funding from the Fed’s budget.\textsuperscript{126} On the first anniversary of Dodd-Frank, the House passed major reforms to the CFPB.\textsuperscript{127}

Over the coming years, new legislative proposals to weaken the agency got bolder and more creative. One bill would have eliminated most of the CFPB’s supervisory and enforcement powers, ended its independent funding source, made the agency’s public consumer complaint database secret, halted its authority to regulate small loans like payday lending, reduced the pay of agency employees, and, of course, made the director removable at will.\textsuperscript{128} Another would have prevented the agency from collecting loan data on small and minority businesses, and replaced the notice-and-comment rulemaking process with a more cumbersome one that has been shown to lengthen the rulemaking process by more than five times.\textsuperscript{129} At one point, Republicans also proposed

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{124} Emily Stephenson, \textit{Senate Confirms Cordray as Consumer Bureau Chief}, REUTERS (July 16, 2013, 11:45 AM), https://www.reuters.com/article/us-financial-regulation-cordray/senate-confirms-cordray-as-consumer-bureau-chief-idUSBRE96F0UD20130716 [https://perma.cc/Q2HZ-B3Q7].
  \item \textsuperscript{126} H.R. 1121, 112th Cong. (2011) (proposing to replace the Director of the CFPB with a five-member Commission); H.R. Res. 358, 112th Cong. (2011) (proposing to strengthen the review authority of the FSOC); H.R. 1640, 112th Cong. (2011) (proposing that the CFPB be subjected to regular appropriations); Wilmarth, supra note 65, at 890–91.
  \item \textsuperscript{127} Consumer Financial Protection Safety and Soundness Improvement Act of 2011, H.R. 1315, 112th Cong. (as passed by House, July 21, 2011) (passed by a vote of 241–173); Wilmarth, supra note 65, at 891–92.
\end{itemize}
using budget reconciliation to end independent funding for the agency.\textsuperscript{130} All told, between 2011 and 2017, Republicans introduced 135 bills and resolutions designed to hamper or kill the agency.\textsuperscript{131} Importantly, many of these proposals took aim at areas in which the CFPB had been successful, such as its enforcement actions against Wells Fargo and its consumer complaint hotline.\textsuperscript{132}

At the same time, House Republicans used their oversight powers in extraordinary ways, weaponizing them to tie up the agency and its leadership in paperwork, legal battles, and invented scandals. They (and the Chamber of Commerce) attacked the CFPB for the cost of renovating its headquarters,\textsuperscript{133} a “run-down concrete building” that had not been remodeled since 1976.\textsuperscript{134} When they appealed to the Inspector General to investigate plans for this “Taj Mahal,”\textsuperscript{135} it found that “construction costs appear reasonable”\textsuperscript{136} and appropriate cost controls were in place.\textsuperscript{137} The National Capital Planning Commission even


\textsuperscript{131} Rivlin & Antilla, supra note 106.

\textsuperscript{132} DEMOCRATIC STAFF, supra note 130, at 21–22.


“commend[ed]” the CFPB and the General Services Administration for the renovations.  

At times oversight seemed designed to prevent the agency from accomplishing its statutorily directed obligations. Dodd-Frank required the CFPB to study mandatory arbitration clauses and issue rules consistent with its findings.  Five days before the final rule went public, Committee Chairman Jeb Hensarling threatened Cordray with contempt proceedings if he promulgated the rule prior to the agency responding to his requests for thousands of documents.  House Republicans had flooded the agency with oversight requests, writing ninety letters of inquiry to the agency between 2014 and 2017 and requiring the agency to produce 170,000 pages of documents (which it did).  Chairman Hensarling even adopted the practice of issuing unilateral subpoenas — without committee debate or vote — and proceeded to subpoena the CFPB twenty times, leading to more than forty hours of staff depositions.  

When President Trump entered office in 2017, Republicans expanded their arsenal against the agency. They took up an innovative use for the Congressional Review Act (CRA). The CRA is meant to allow Congress to override an agency rulemaking by a majority vote and the President’s signature.  The Republicans used it to overturn the CFPB’s arbitration rule (with Vice President Pence’s tiebreaking vote), and then they went further and used it to overturn CFPB guidance on auto lending.  By the end of 2017, Republicans were even attacking the agency for inaction. After the CFPB issued a historic fine against Wells Fargo for fraudulently opening accounts for unknowing


140 DEMOCRATIC STAFF, supra note 130, at 25–26.

141 Id. at 21.

142 Id.


144 Id. §§ 801–802.

145 See Rivlin & Antilla, supra note 106.

customers.

C. The Fox in the Henhouse

“It’s time to fire King Richard,” Senator Ben Sasse commented prior to Donald Trump’s inauguration. Almost a year later, in November 2017, Cordray resigned as head of the CFPB and designated his chief of staff Leondra English as the CFPB’s interim director. President Trump, a few hours later, appointed OMB director Mick Mulvaney as interim director. The schism at the CFPB immediately went to the courts, with English arguing that Dodd-Frank explicitly gave Cordray the power to choose an interim director and the Trump Administration countering that the terms of the Federal Vacancies Act governed. English ended her challenge half a year later when President Trump nominated Kathy Kraninger to run the Bureau.

In control of the CFPB, Mulvaney and then Kraninger took to dismantling the financial watchdog from the inside. Mulvaney had opposed the agency vehemently as a congressman and even sponsored legislation to eliminate it. Now at the helm of the agency he detested, Mulvaney went systematically through the agency’s structures, powers,


149 Rivlin & Anstila, supra note 106.


153 Guida & O’Donnell, supra note 130.

and operations to twist them to serve his preferences. In area after area — enforcement, rulemaking, supervisions, funding, personnel, and culture — Mulvaney went to war.

He halted new enforcement actions and started withdrawing ongoing enforcement actions, particularly against payday lenders. In 2018, the CFPB undertook only eleven enforcement actions, a fraction of the fifty-five it announced in 2015. When it came to rulemaking, Mulvaney began by reconsidering payday lending rules and dropping plans for rules on overdraft payments and student loan servicing. Mulvaney’s CFPB decided it would no longer exercise its supervisory powers to prevent financial institutions from targeting servicemembers with fraudulent or abusive products. He downgraded the status of the student lending office and the office of fair lending by merging them into other offices. And he told the Federal Reserve that the CFPB did not need any new funding.

The CFPB opponent-turned-leader ordered a hiring freeze upon taking over the agency, and effectively made it permanent as part of a strategy of attrition to reduce the capacity of the agency to regulate and enforce the laws. He tapped political appointees to be “policy associate directors” who would shadow the career civil service bureau chiefs,

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157 Confessore, supra note 154.


160 McCoy, supra note 32, at 2591–93; Glenn Thrush & Stacy Cowley, Mulvaney Downgrades Student Loan Unit in Consumer Bureau Reshuffle, N.Y. TIMES (May 9, 2018), https://nyti.ms/21zt1jk [https://perma.cc/5U36-WFMK].


implicitly to ensure they would comply with the Administration’s political preferences. New appointees often came from the ranks of those who had opposed the agency and worked to weaken it. And they summarily dismissed every member of the agency’s Consumer Advisory Board, Community Bank Advisory Council, and Credit Union Advisory Council.

Finally, Mulvaney took on a number of symbolic actions to break the consumer-focused, mission-driven culture of the agency. His staff rewrote the CFPB’s mission statement to include a focus on “unduly burdensome regulations.” They changed the CFPB’s logo, sign, and name to the “Bureau of Consumer Financial Protection.” This cosmetic and symbolic change would cost the agency between $9 and $19 million and financial firms about $300 million. Mulvaney even changed the namesake of the agency’s honors program for graduating law students from noted consumer lawyer and Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis to Justice Joseph Story. Justice Story, who is best known for his commentaries on the Constitution, has no obvious link to consumer issues.

According to one commentator, Mulvaney left the CFPB in a “vegetative state.” Director Kraninger’s tenure in office continued the trend. Kraninger refused to get refunds for consumers when a payday lender extracted money from 6,829 consumer bank accounts without their permission — even though the lender offered to pay $1.6 million in restitution. And in the midst of the COVID-19 economic crisis,
with millions unemployed and tens of thousands of consumer complaints flooding into the CFPB’s offices, Kraninger has instead sought to weaken or delay rules relating to mortgage lenders and credit card companies.172

D. Challenging the CFPB

In light of the battle over the agency, it might not seem surprising that such a heated political brawl would take on a constitutional valence and that a constitutional challenge would reach the Supreme Court. But it should be at least somewhat puzzling, given what the outcome was likely to be.

The reason is that in 2010, the Supreme Court decided a case called Free Enterprise Fund v. Public Co. Accounting Oversight Board. Free Enterprise Fund argued that the accounting agency’s for-cause removal restrictions rendered it unconstitutional because it was located within the Securities and Exchange Commission, another independent agency.173 This nestled system created a double-insulation from presidential removal. Free Enterprise Fund raised a variety of unitary executive theory arguments that would also surface in the CFPB case, but what is notable is that the Court stopped short of invalidating the PCAOB wholesale.174 Rather, it found that the removal provision was severable from the rest of the statute.175 The PCAOB continued to operate, but board members would be subject to at-will removal from office.176

Four years later, the CFPB issued charges against mortgage lender PHH for violating the Real Estate Settlements Procedures Act of 1974 (RESPA) by soliciting reinsurance kickbacks from mortgage insurers in exchange for steering business to them.177 PHH responded by challenging the constitutionality of the agency’s structure, a case it ultimately lost en banc in the D.C. Circuit in 2018,178 after Cordray had left the agency and President Trump picked Mulvaney as interim successor.

Given Free Enterprise Fund, it is not entirely clear why it made sense for PHH to challenge the constitutionality of the CFPB starting

173 See id. at 487.
174 See id. at 487–88.
175 Id. at 508.
176 Id. at 507. Notably, the accounting firm (and member of Free Enterprise Fund) did not get any relief from the case. See Patricia L. Bellia, PCAOB and the Persistence of the Removal Puzzle, 80 GEO. WASH. L. REV. 1371, 1373–74 (2012) (noting the “hollow victory” for the challengers, id. at 1373).
178 Id. at 84.
in 2014. *Free Enterprise Fund* provided strong evidence that the Roberts Court’s remedy for a constitutional violation of this type would be to sever the removal provision and let the agency continue to function. PHH would therefore not have been off the hook had it won its challenge. It is possible PHH thought a victory would enable the next Republican President, perhaps arriving in 2017, to fire Cordray and pick a new director who would grant them relief. But through much of the 2016 election cycle, the conventional wisdom was that Hillary Clinton would become President, not Donald Trump.

Seila’s actions are equally puzzling, if not more so. After losing its case in district court, Seila appealed to the Ninth Circuit in 2017 and continued its case after Cordray had departed later that year and Mulvaney was interim director. In spite of systematically attempting to dismantle the agency, the now Trump-controlled CFPB continued to press its case against Seila. Perhaps this was to keep Seila’s constitutional case alive. But again, it is unclear why that mattered much, given the likely remedy after *Free Enterprise Fund*.

So how do we explain the case? I think there are two likely answers. First, as we have seen, for the entirety of the last decade, the CFPB has been the subject of relentless attacks — to prevent it from coming into being, weaken it, reform it, abolish it, and eviscerate it from the inside. This political and economic battle — a battle between Republicans and Democrats, between financial institutions and ordinary families, between Wall Street and Washington — simply gained a momentum that couldn’t be stopped. The interests opposed to the agency had mobilized forces so widely that many others embraced the project to kill it. Even if there were only a small chance of a broader, more radical victory — there was still a chance. The second possibility, which is not in conflict with the first, is that the underlying aims of the case were to advance the constitutional vision of the unitary executive. There too, there was a chance that a Supreme Court with new Justices might go further than the *Free Enterprise* Court.

II. **Seila and the Rise of the Unitary Executive**

Under the unitary executive theory, Article II, section 1 of the Constitution, which vests “the executive Power” in the President, combines with the Take Care Clause to “creat[e] a hierarchical, unified executive department under the direct control of the President.”

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executive theorists argue that the President holds “all” of the executive power.\textsuperscript{181} This includes, on their account, the power to “direct, control, and supervise inferior officers or agencies.”\textsuperscript{182} Among the consequences is that congressionally specified removal criteria are unconstitutional.\textsuperscript{183}

The Seila Court adopts much of the unitary executive theory’s reasoning. This Part places Seila in a second context: the decades-long rise of the unitary executive theory. It first recounts how the theory grew within the Justice Department in the 1980s, then in the academy in the 1990s. By the 2000s, the theory was prominent and, during the George W. Bush Administration, commonly invoked. Seila should be seen as part of this broader legal movement, and the success of the movement in providing support for the theory can partly explain the brevity of the Court’s opinion. In her skillful dissent, Justice Kagan takes aim at each of the pillars of the majority’s approach with devastating effect. Her counterattack leaves the reader feeling that the 5–4 divide is not a mere difference of interpretation, but rather a serious political confrontation.

\section{A. The Conservative Legal Movement and the Rise of the Unitary Executive Theory}

Debates over the President’s ability to remove executive branch officers have existed throughout American constitutional history and have regularly been some of the most fiercely battled political and legal issues.\textsuperscript{184} But the modern debate over the removal power started during the Reagan Administration with the rise of the unitary executive theory.\textsuperscript{185} Based on interviews, documents, and data collection, Professor Amanda Hollis-Brusky has shown how individuals and groups associated with the conservative legal movement worked from the 1980s through the 2000s to expand the plausibility and legitimacy of the unitary executive theory.\textsuperscript{186} The story of the theory’s rise is not the traditional one offered under the rubric of popular constitutionalism, which

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{181} Id. (emphasis omitted).
\item \textsuperscript{182} Id.
\item \textsuperscript{183} Id. at 1165–66. Other consequences include the ability of the President to supervise agencies. See generally, e.g., PETER M. SHANE, MADISON’S NIGHTMARE 168 (2009) (discussing regulatory review).
\item \textsuperscript{184} See generally J. DAVID ALVIS, JEREMY D. BAILEY & F. FLAGG TAYLOR IV, THE CONTESTED REMOVAL POWER, 1789–2010 (2013). As for the ferocity, consider the controversy over the Second Bank of the United States in the Jackson Administration, id. at 74, and the Tenure of Office Act during the Andrew Johnson Administration, id. at 106.
\item \textsuperscript{185} Steven G. Calabresi & Christopher S. Yoo, The Unitary Executive During the First Half-Century, 47 CASE W. RESRV. L. REV. 1451, 1452–53 (1997) (noting that “[t]his modern debate began with claims of executive authority advanced by President Reagan, whose administration continually questioned the constitutionality of independent agencies and of independent counsels,” id. at 1452).
\end{itemize}
emphasizes the importance of popular opinion. Rather, it was largely a function of shifting opinions among legal elites. As Professor Jack Balkin has noted, arguments can go from “off the wall” to “on the wall” quickly when embraced by establishment politicians, and that in turn requires an intellectual foundation and often social movement support.

In the 1970s, the unitary theory per se hardly existed, with only a few scattered references in the legal literature. After the election of President Reagan and particularly after the selection of Ed Meese as Attorney General, the theory began to grow in prominence. For conservatives in the Administration, as Professor and former Reagan Solicitor General Charles Fried has recounted, the Reagan Revolution had two parts. The first was an economic revolution to prevent politicians from “regulating the economy” and “redistributing wealth.” The second was a legal revolution: “[C]ourts should be more disciplined, less adventurous and political in interpreting the law, especially the law of the Constitution; [and] the President must be allowed a strong hand in governing the nation and providing leadership . . . .”

Under Attorney General Meese, the Justice Department welcomed and encouraged intellectual discussion about the law, particularly in
ways that advanced the conservative movement’s aims to expand presidential power. The Attorney General hosted seminars and workshops, including on the separation of powers and the unitary executive theory, in order to persuade skeptics — including Fried, who himself wasn’t initially “committed to th[e] program.”

The push for greater presidential power largely focused on four areas: Office of Legal Counsel (OLC) opinions, presidential signing statements, regulatory review of agencies, and Supreme Court arguments.

Over the course of the 1980s, the Reagan Administration issued seven OLC opinions that mentioned the unitary theory. Notably, the theory evolved over time. In 1981, it was described “in general and rather amorphous terms as the constitutional basis for the President’s role in ensuring ‘uniform and unitary’ execution of the laws.”

But, Hollis-Brusky notes, it had “evolved into the ‘principle of the unitary executive’” by 1983. Some of these opinions, written by then-head of the Office of Legal Counsel Theodore Olson, tried to rein in different forms of agency independence.

The “signing statement initiative,” a second effort, was intended not to expound the unitary executive as doctrine, but to express it in practice. The President would issue signing statements in order to give agencies guidance on the President’s view of legislation.

The Reagan Administration also moved to gain more control over regulatory agencies. President Reagan required executive branch agencies to adopt rules based on cost-benefit analysis if permitted by statute, and to submit rules to the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs for review. Despite an OLC opinion that it could apply the executive order to independent agencies, the administration declined to do so for political reasons. Still, it saw independent commissioners as “the extreme example, a kind of emblem, of one of the biggest obstacles to the

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192 Hollis-Brusky, supra note 186, at 207 (alteration in original) (quoting Fried, supra note 190, at 158); see id. at 202–03.


196 Hollis-Brusky, supra note 186, at 211–12. For a broader discussion of the legality and consequences of signing statements, see Curtis A. Bradley & Eric A. Posner, Presidential Signing Statements and Executive Power, 23 CONST. COMMENT. 307 (2006). Bradley and Posner note that President Reagan’s Attorney General Ed Meese took an “aggressive” view of the interpretive weight signing statements should play — and that this was likely part of a broader attempt to revive presidential power after Watergate. Bradley & Posner, supra, at 316.


198 Stack, supra note 195, at 410.
administration’s program,” and members of the Administration wanted a Supreme Court case declaring “that statutory limitations on their removal were unconstitutional.” As Attorney General Meese said in a 1985 speech, “federal agencies performing executive functions are themselves properly agents of the executive. They are not ‘quasi’ this or ‘independent’ that.”

The marquee event for the removal power during the Reagan Administration was *Morrison v. Olson*, a 1988 case challenging the constitutionality of the independent counsel provisions of the Ethics in Government Act. In his 2–1 opinion in the D.C. Circuit, Judge Silberman referred to the unitary executive theory by name ten times in holding that the provisions were unconstitutional. At the Supreme Court, the government relied on the Take Care Clause to argue that the removal restriction was impermissible. Solicitor General Fried later said that he had been persuaded by Meese’s Department of Justice seminars. By an 8–1 margin, with only Justice Scalia dissenting, the Supreme Court rejected the President’s power to remove the independent counsel, upholding the statute and in the process actually broadening the scope of the existing rule under *Humphrey’s Executor*. Justice Scalia’s dissent had referenced the theory twice by name, but the case was a devastating defeat for the unitary theory’s attempt to establish a presidential removal power. So thorough was the loss that after *Morrison* reversed him, Judge Silberman analogized his opinion to Pickett’s Charge at Gettysburg, the “high water mark” of the Confederacy.

But it wasn’t. Justice Scalia’s dissent gave the unitary executive new life. From 1973 to 1988, Hollis-Brusky reports, the theory was mentioned by name in thirty-eight law review articles. In the four years after *Morrison*, seventy-six articles mentioned it. Throughout the

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199 FRIED, supra note 190, at 154–55.
200 Id. at 157.
203 For a history of the case, with relevant context to the rise of the unitary executive, see Stack, supra note 195, at 401.
206 Hollis-Brusky, supra note 186, at 207.
207 Humphrey’s Ex’r v. United States, 295 U.S. 602 (1935); see also *Morrison*, 487 U.S. at 669.
208 See *Morrison*, 487 U.S. at 727, 732 (Scalia, J., dissenting); Hollis-Brusky, supra note 186, at 209.
210 Id. at 209–10.
211 See id. at 210–11.
1990s and into the 2000s, Federalist Society scholars took up the project of articulating the theory in great detail.\textsuperscript{212} Articles put forward the textual and structural case for the theory,\textsuperscript{213} the historical case for the theory,\textsuperscript{214} and even the functional arguments in its favor.\textsuperscript{215} This impressive, systematic body of scholarship not only expanded the Overton window of legal argument, it also sparked more and more scholarship discussing the theory itself. From 2001 to 2008, there were 453 articles discussing the unitary executive.\textsuperscript{216}

Along with a stronger academic pedigree, the theory found a second life in government.\textsuperscript{217} The Reagan Administration had mentioned the unitary executive in twelve executive branch documents; the George W. Bush Administration mentioned it in ninety.\textsuperscript{218} During the Bush Administration, the unitary executive found its way into OLC opinions on legal issues related to the war on terror, and it undergirded greater oversight of federal agencies.\textsuperscript{219} By the time of Free Enterprise Fund in 2010 and Seila in 2020, the unitary executive theory had become standard in separation of powers debates — particularly among conservatives.

\textbf{B. Seila and the Emergence of a Presidential Removal Power}

Writing for a 5–4 majority on the constitutional question in Seila, Chief Justice Roberts adopted much of the unitary executive theory’s reasoning.\textsuperscript{220}

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{212} Id. at 219–20.
\textsuperscript{213} See generally Steven G. Calabresi & Saikrishna B. Prakash, The President’s Power to Execute the Laws, 104 YALE L.J. 541 (1994); Calabresi & Rhodes, supra note 180.
\textsuperscript{216} Hollis-Brusky, supra note 186, at 228.
\textsuperscript{217} The two, as Metzger has noted in the related context of the administrative state, can be reinforcing. See Metzger, supra note 64, at 33 (“[T]here is a mutually reinforcing relationship between judicial and academic attacks on the administrative state.”).
\textsuperscript{218} Hollis-Brusky, supra note 186, at 199.
\textsuperscript{219} See SHANE, supra note 185, at 156–57; Hollis-Brusky, supra note 186, at 235.
\textsuperscript{220} The majority on the constitutional question consisted of Chief Justice Roberts and Justices Thomas, Alito, Gorsuch, and Kavanaugh. The majority on the severability issue comprised Chief Justice Roberts and Justices Ginsburg, Breyer, Alito, Sotomayor, Kagan, and Kavanaugh. Chief Justice Roberts first addressed three arguments that the Court should not reach the merits: (1) that the demand issued to Seila was not “traceable” to the constitutional defect and that, in removal cases, the action would not have been taken if the official in question were removable, \textit{Seila}, 140 S. Ct. at 2195; (2) that the constitutionality of the removal power should be assessed in the context of a contested removal; and (3) that there was no “adverseness” because the parties agreed, \textit{id.} at 2166; see \textit{id.} at 2195–97. These arguments were made by the court-appointed amicus because the government supported Seila’s argument. \textit{Id.} at 2195.
\end{footnotes}
who must ‘take Care that the Laws be faithfully executed,’” Chief Justice Roberts began. He noted that the “entire” executive power belonged to the President, having elsewhere mentioned that “all of it” is the President’s. This power “generally includes the ability to remove executive officials, for it is ‘only the authority that can remove’ such officials that they ‘must fear and, in the performance of [their] functions, obey.’”

The Chief Justice briefly noted that this view was confirmed by history and precedent, and in two paragraphs summarized the so-called “Decision of 1789,” in which the first Congress debated removals while creating the first federal government departments, and Myers v. United States, in which Chief Justice Taft recognized “the President’s prerogative to remove executive officials.” After referencing his own opinion in Free Enterprise Fund, Chief Justice Roberts announced two exceptions to the “President’s unrestricted removal power.” The first was based on Humphrey’s Executor. That case was decided nine years after Myers and all but overturned it while upholding a law enabling Federal Trade Commissioners to serve for a term of years, with removal for inefficiency, neglect, or malfeasance in office. Roberts characterized Humphrey’s Executor narrowly, stating that the 1935 Court saw the FTC as not exercising substantial executive power. The second exception, which explained Morrison, was for “inferior officers with limited duties and no policymaking” role.

Applying this framework to the CFPB, the Chief Justice argued that the agency fit into neither exception. It exercised legislative, judicial, and executive functions, and, unlike the FTC, was not a multimember commission. The CFPB director was also plainly not an inferior officer. The agency’s structure was “wholly unprecedented,” an “indication of [a] severe constitutional problem.” Chief Justice Roberts argued that four other examples of single-director agencies with removal protections

221 Id. at 2197 (first quoting U.S. CONST. art. II, § 1, cl. 1; then quoting id. art. II, § 3).
222 Id.
223 Id. at 2191.
224 Id. at 2197 (alteration in original) (quoting Bowsher v. Synar, 478 U.S. 714, 726 (1986)).
225 272 U.S. 52 (1926).
226 Seila, 140 S. Ct. at 2197.
227 Id. at 2198.
229 Seila, 140 S. Ct. at 2198–99.
230 Id. at 2199–200.
231 Id. at 2200.
were short in duration or “modern and contested.” The agency’s design also violated the constitutional structure because the Constitution “avoids concentrating power in the hands of any single individual” except the President. The Chief Justice noted that the Framers’ “constitutional strategy [was] straightforward: divide power everywhere except for the Presidency, and render the President directly accountable to the people through regular elections.” The CFPB’s structure was thus unconstitutional because it “vest[ed] significant governmental power in the hands of a single individual accountable to no one.” Turning to the remedy, Chief Justice Roberts found that the removal restriction was severable from the rest of the statute, citing Free Enterprise Fund.

Justice Thomas dissented from the severability analysis, arguing that the remedy should simply be to not enforce the CFPB’s actions. He also argued that Humphrey’s Executor was unconstitutional and should be overturned outright, instead of narrowed. Still, he was willing to join the Chief Justice because the opinion “limit[ed] Humphrey’s Executor to ‘multimember expert agencies that do not wield substantial executive power.’” Justice Thomas then offered a full-throated articulation of the unitary executive theory that included complete executive power over removals.

Between the two opinions, five Justices have embraced much or all of the logic and reasoning of the unitary executive theory with respect to removals. The President’s “executive power” and the Take Care Clause are the foundation for this largely preclusive removal power, and these Justices read history and precedents to support that position. Declared all but dead by Judge Silberman after the 8–1 defeat in Morrison, the unitary theory and the removal power rose again — and they now have a 5–4 majority on the Supreme Court.

C. The Case Against Seila

What is perhaps most surprising about Seila’s treatment of text and structure is not that the Court came to interpretive judgments in these areas, but that it did so with comparatively little analysis or discussion,

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233 Id. at 2201–02. These are the Civil War-era Comptroller of the Currency, Office of Special Counsel, Social Security Administrator, and head of the Federal Housing Finance Agency. Id.
234 Id. at 2202.
235 Id. at 2203.
236 Id. Chief Justice Roberts also noted that some Presidents might never get to nominate a CFPB director, and the CFPB’s funding is not appropriated by Congress. Id. at 2204.
237 Id. at 2209.
238 Id. at 2219 (Thomas, J., concurring in part and dissenting in part). Justice Gorsuch joined Justice Thomas’s partial dissent.
239 Id. at 2212.
240 Id. at 2211 (quoting id. at 2199 (majority opinion) (emphasis added)).
241 See id. at 2212–19.
given the rebuttals both in Justice Kagan’s spirited dissent and in a growing body of scholarship undermining those judgments. Many of these arguments are well known and covered in Justice Kagan’s dissent, but a few are worth reiterating.

First, the claim that “executive power” includes “the ability to remove executive officials.” Putting aside the atextual (and aggrandizing) references to “all of” or the “entire” executive power, one of the central debates in removal cases is whether the power to remove a subordinate is “executive” in nature. The text of the Constitution does not define “executive,” and Justice Kagan notes that the Morrison Court was unwilling to find a preclusive, unrestrictable removal power because of the term’s generality. The text itself gives a strong clue that “executive” cannot hold such a meaning. Under the Opinions Clause in Article II, the President is explicitly authorized to ask subordinates for their written opinions. If the executive power were as vast and all-inclusive as unitary theorists suggest, Justice Kagan observes, the Opinions Clause would be redundant at best and inexplicable at worst. The majority provides no response to this argument. Justice Kagan also offers historical arguments to show that “executive power” does not include the power to remove: Parliament restricted the King’s removals, and many states at the time of the Framing permitted restrictions on gubernatorial removals. In recent scholarly work, Professor Julian Mortenson has gone further and demonstrated persuasively that in both England and during the Framing and Ratification period, the phrase “executive power” had no substantive content; it meant merely the power to execute laws created by some other body.

The Take Care Clause also provides the Court with little additional support for its position, as Justice Kagan notes and scholars have argued

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242 Id. at 2197 (majority opinion).
243 Id. at 2227–28 (Kagan, J., concurring in part and dissenting in part) (“[E]xtrapolating from such ‘general constitutional language’ . . . is ‘more than the text will bear.’” Id. at 2228 (alteration in original) (quoting Morrison v. Olson, 487 U.S. 654, 690 n.29 (1988))).
244 U.S. CONST. art. II, § 2, cl. 1.
245 Seila, 140 S. Ct. at 2227 n.3 (Kagan, J., concurring in part and dissenting in part).
246 Id. at 2228; see also Peter M. Shane, The Originalist Myth of the Unitary Executive, 19 U. PA. J. CONST. L. 323 (2016) (discussing state constitutions); Peter M. Shane, Prosecutors at the Periphery, 94 CHI.-KENT L. REV. 241 (2019) (noting that criminal prosecution was understood to be quasi-judicial as much as executive at the time of the Founding).
247 See generally Julian Davis Mortenson, Article II Vests the Executive Power, Not the Royal Prerogative, 119 COLUM. L. REV. 1769 (2019); Julian Davis Mortenson, The Executive Power Clause, 167 U. PA. L. REV. (forthcoming 2020). Mortenson contrasts executive power with the King’s “prerogative powers,” which were substantive. Mortenson, Article II Vests the Executive Power, Not the Royal Prerogative, supra, at 1768 & n.253. Note also that Chief Justice Roberts refers to removal as the President’s “prerogative.” Seila, 140 S. Ct. at 2197.
at great length. The Clause is framed as a duty, rather than a power, and it appears in a section of Article II enumerating duties, not powers. To the extent the Take Care Clause is a power, Justice Kagan observes, it is only the power to ensure that “the laws” (however they are fashioned) are “executed.” In this sense, a removal according to congressionally specified criteria, such as inefficiency, neglect, or malfeasance in office, is the faithful execution of the laws. Nonremoval except for at the end of a term of years (which every appointee removable for inefficiency, neglect, or malfeasance in office had) is also the faithful execution of the laws. “The President,” as Justice Brandeis noted in Myers, “performs his full constitutional duty, if, with the means and instruments provided by Congress and within the limitations prescribed by it, he uses his best endeavors to secure the faithful execution of the laws.”

Perhaps the most striking feature of Seila’s textual and structural analysis is that, in his thirty-seven-page majority opinion, Chief Justice Roberts never once mentions the Necessary and Proper Clause. The Clause is of obvious relevance, as it gives Congress the power “[t]o make all Laws . . . necessary and proper” to execute not just its Article I powers, but also “all other Powers vested by this Constitution in the Government of the United States, or in any Department or Officer thereof.” The Clause even uses the word “vest,” as if to make clear that Congress can pass laws to organize the executive power that is “vested” in Article II. As Dean John Manning has noted, “the Necessary and Proper Clause gives Congress express power to prescribe the means by which both the executive and judicial powers are carried

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249 U.S. CONST. art. II.

250 Seila, 140 S. Ct. at 2228 (Kagan, J., concurring in part and dissenting in part).

251 Manners & Menand, supra note 228.

252 Kirti Dutla & Richard L. Revesz, Deconstructing Independent Agencies (and Executive Agencies), 98 CORNELL L. REV. 769, 790 tbl.2 (2013) (showing that all agency heads or administrators with statutory for-cause removal protection have specified tenures).

253 Manners & Menand, supra note 228. Scholars sometimes associated with the unitary executive theory even recognize that Congress thus has a removal power, in the sense that it can pass laws restricting officers to a term of years and eliminate offices altogether. See Saikrishna Prakash, Removal and Tenure in Office, 92 VA. L. REV. 1779, 1780 (2006).


into execution." Justice Kagan deftly argues that the Court “appropriates” this power from Congress. Another way to put it is that *Seila* involves the erasure of explicit, textually granted Article I powers. *Seila* also presumes that the President’s removal power is “confirmed by history and precedent.” The Chief Justice says that the so-called “Decision of 1789” settled the question. The best historical evidence, however, does not support this interpretation. Justice Kagan notes that “Taft’s historical research [on the Decision] has held up even worse than *Myers*’ holding,” and observes that one of the leading scholars of executive power, Professor Sai Prakash, says in his study of the Decision that the First Congress “never squarely addressed” the removal question at issue in *Seila*. Professor Jed Shugerman’s review goes even further in questioning the Court’s reading of the early history. Shugerman argues that “Chief Justice Roberts’s interpretation is consistent with Taft’s Madison, but not Madison’s Madison.” Among other pieces of evidence, including an extensive analysis of legislative voting patterns, Shugerman says Chief Justice Roberts ignores that Madison himself recognized the First Congress had not established a default rule in favor of at-pleasure removal.

In a set of passages reminiscent of Professor Karl Llewellyn’s famous account of the canons of construction, Justice Kagan and Chief Justice

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259 Id. at 2197 (majority opinion); see also id. at 2192 (arguing the power to remove was “settled by the First Congress”).

260 Id. at 2197 (“The view that ‘prevailed, as most consonant to the text of the Constitution’ and ‘to the requisite responsibility and harmony in the Executive Department,’ was that the executive power included a power to oversee executive officers through removal.” (quoting Free Enter. Fund v. Pub. Co. Acct. Oversight Bd., 561 U.S. 477, 492 (2010))).


264 Id.
Roberts also duel over the *Federalist Papers*. Llewellyn noted that for every canon there is an equal and opposite canon, such that any thrust of the rhetorical epee can be parried by a skilled fencer. Justice Kagan offers up dueling views on the removal power — both from the *Federalist Papers* — as a way to show that there was no settled meaning at ratification. The Chief Justice’s response is that Madison and Hamilton changed their minds over time. It may be that the Court means to adopt a “liquidation” theory of interpretation, but even then, the facts on the Decision of 1789 remain, at best, messy, complex, and inconclusive. Whether or not the Court adopts a liquidation theory, its account of the historical record raises classic interpretive problems that Judge Harold Leventhal once described (and that Justice Scalia characterized) as “looking over a crowd and picking your friends.” When a legislative record is conflicting, messy, and complicated, and the enacted legislative text is unclear, relying on reasoning and inferences from legislative debates, proposals, actions, or inaction can easily turn into cherry-picking evidence that supports a predetermined policy position.

Justice Kagan forcefully shows that precedent also cuts against the Court’s position. Although the Chief Justice characterized *Myers* as a “landmark” case in both *Free Enterprise Fund* and *Seila*, Justice Kagan points out that the Court had all but overturned *Myers* prior to these recent cases, in favor of the approach offered in *Humphrey’s Executor* and *Morrison*. *Humphrey’s Executor*, Justice Kagan notes, “unceremoniously — and unanimously — confined *Myers* to its facts”

265 Karl N. 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, 401–06 (1950); see *Seila*, 140 S. Ct. at 2229 n.4 (Kagan, J., concurring in part and dissenting in part); id. at 2205 n.10 (majority opinion).

266 Llewellyn, supra note 265, at 401–06.

267 See *Seila*, 140 S. Ct. at 2229 (Kagan, J., concurring in part and dissenting in part) (“In *Federalist No. 77*, Hamilton presumed that under the new Constitution ‘[t]he consent of the Senate would be necessary to displace as well as to appoint’ officers of the United States.”); id. (quoting THE FEDERALIST NO. 39, in which Madison says “[t]he tenure of the ministerial offices generally will be a subject of legal regulation, conformably to the reason of the case, and the example of the State Constitutions”). She notes too that “[n]either view, of course, at all supports the majority’s story.” Id.

268 Id. at 2205 n.10 (majority opinion).


and “expressly ‘disapproved’” everything in the decision as “out of harmony” with Humphrey’s Executor (with the sole exception of the narrow factual holding regarding postmasters of the first class).272

Justice Kagan also pushed back on the Court’s antinovelty claim. The Necessary and Proper Clause is not a “Rinse and Repeat” clause, she said.273 “Congress had no obligation to make a carbon copy of a design from a bygone era.”274 In scholarly work, Professor Leah Litman has exhaustively shown that antinovelty arguments make little logical or constitutional sense, in part because there is no constitutional or practical reason for Congress to regulate to its fullest capacity in every possible manner at every possible time.275 But it is also worth noting that how the Court frames the historical scope of its inquiry shapes whether an agency’s design looks novel. For example, Seila talks of the Civil War–era Comptroller, but not the Founding-era Comptroller (as Justice Kagan points out).276 It discusses the Administrator of Social Security and the head of the Federal Housing Finance Agency,277 but not the Sinking Fund Commission, a Hamilton-proposed, First Congress–created economic agency whose members included the Chief Justice and the Vice President, neither of whom could be removed from office.278 The Court also offers no explanation for the Second National Bank, created in 1816 with the assent of then-President James Madison.279 The President could appoint and remove only one-fifth of the Bank’s directors.280 The Second Bank, of course, was also upheld by Chief Justice Marshall as an exercise of the Necessary and Proper power in McCulloch v. Maryland.281 Framing the scope of historical practice — and limiting it to single-director heads of agencies with for-cause removal protections — is itself a freighted choice. It is unclear why the Court should adopt this level of specificity when evaluating the

272 Seila, 140 S. Ct. at 2233 (Kagan, J., concurring in part and dissenting in part) (quoting Humphrey’s Ex’r v. United States, 295 U.S. 602, 626 (1935)).
273 Id. at 2241.
274 Id. at 2242.
276 Seila, 140 S. Ct. at 2241 (Kagan, J., concurring in part and dissenting in part).
277 Id. at 2202 (majority opinion).
279 Seila, 140 S. Ct. at 2231 (Kagan, J., concurring in part and dissenting in part).
280 Id.
congressional design of agencies, unless its goal is to stack the deck against novel agency designs.282

All of this should be troubling to most constitutional lawyers. One of the central arguments for relying on text and history in constitutional interpretation is judicial restraint.283 Following the text or the original history, or even historical practice, is supposed to constrain judges and prevent them from imposing their policy preferences on the country.284 The more a judge is picking friends from the historical crowd, to modify the old saying, the more likely it is the judge is making policy. Given the strong arguments against the Court’s position on text, structure, original history, and historical practice, let alone the un-precedenting of Humphrey’s Executor and re-precedenting of Myers, it is not clear that there is much restraint being exercised in Seila.

And it is not as if a restrained approach was unavailable to the conservative majority. In thorough, expansive, and persuasive articles, Dean John Manning has offered a lesson in how a faithful, conservative, restrained interpreter of the Constitution’s text should address separation of powers cases.285 “Where the Constitution is specific,” the Court should follow it.286 Where “no specific clause speaks directly to the question at issue, interpreters must respect the document’s indeterminacy,”287 which in this context defaults to the textually granted general authority of the Necessary and Proper Clause. But the Court does not follow Manning’s approach or counter it. Indeed, it is Justice Kagan who cites Manning and makes the case for judicial restraint in light of text and history.288

As if to underscore, albeit subtly, that even the Justices understood that Seila was a deeply political case, the amicus appointed to argue the CFPB’s case was distinguished conservative lawyer Paul Clement.289 Commentators noted that Justice Kagan likely chose Clement in order

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282 This selection-effects problem is distinct from the weight that longevity is given. As Metzger has noted, members of the Court treat that asymmetrically too. Metzger, supra note 64, at 19 (“[N]ovelty can condemn an administrative arrangement, but lack of novelty can’t save it.”).


284 See Scalia, supra note 283, at 17–18, 23 (discussing textualism in the statutory context).

285 See, e.g., Manning, supra note 257, at 1947; Manning, supra note 258.

286 Manning, supra note 257, at 1947.

287 Id. at 1948.


289 Seila, 140 S. Ct. at 2191.
to appeal to the Court’s conservatives and depoliticize the case.\textsuperscript{290} After oral argument, however, some commentators suggested this tactic might have backfired, because of both Clement’s style and his substance.\textsuperscript{291}

Ultimately, the Court’s weak reasoning, Justice Kagan’s efficient work dismantling it, and the availability of a conservative, textualist alternative leave a reader wondering if there is something else at issue in \textit{Seila} than a simple divide on a technical question of constitutional interpretation — and something bigger at stake with the rise of the unitary executive theory and its support for a preclusive presidential removal power.

\section*{III. The Political Economy of Removals}

One of the more striking things about \textit{Seila} is that its first-order political consequences hardly seem to warrant the conflict over it. It is certainly possible that liberals and conservatives simply disagree on the best reading of the legal materials. But it is worth considering whether the issue in \textit{Seila} might have broader political underpinnings and consequences. This Part starts by noting the first-order symmetry in \textit{Seila} and the broader unitary theory as applied to the removal power. It then speculates on some ways in which \textit{Seila} might have a normative, and ideologically contested, vision of the Constitution undergirding it, and on the particular ways in which its consequences might have politically relevant implications for the administrative state. This third story offers more reasons why \textit{Seila} is worthy of attention and should be considered a deeply “political” case.

\subsection*{A. First-Order Symmetry and the Unitary Executive}

The result in \textit{Seila}, as I have noted, does not have obvious first-order political benefits for conservatives or Republicans. The Trump Administration already controls the CFPB, so the case does not benefit the current Administration. If anything, it could \textit{harm} the current Administration. The rule in \textit{Seila} means a new Democratic President could fire the Republican head of the CFPB and nominate a person of their choosing. Indeed, after the case was decided, commentators immediately noted that the decision was a “real gift” to a possible Biden


Administration, as he could fire Director Kraninger on day one if he is elected.292

An even more aggressive unitary executive decision, along the lines Justice Thomas suggests, would not have made Seila more favorable to conservatives, in terms of its first-order effects. Seila itself seems to contemplate future cases marching in this direction. Chief Justice Roberts described the exceptions to a preclusive presidential removal power as twofold: “[O]ne for multimember expert agencies that do not wield substantial executive power, and one for inferior officers with limited duties and no policymaking or administrative authority.”293 Any multimember commission that currently “wields substantial executive power” is thus potentially at risk of constitutional challenge to ensure its members are removable at-will by the President.294

Every member of the Court seems to understand this phrase as inviting further litigation. The majority attempted to reframe the FTC’s powers in 1935 as limited to “making reports and recommendations to Congress” and “submitting recommended dispositions to an Article III court.”295 This characterization creates a contrast between the 1935 FTC (which was upheld because it did not wield substantial executive power) and the current FTC (which by implication does wield substantial executive power). Justice Kagan fired back that the FTC “could and did run investigations, bring administrative charges, and conduct adjudications,” and that it “lacks all plausibility” that the Court in 1935 misunderstood these powers.296 Her point is to show that the FTC in 1935 did wield substantial executive powers, so as to insulate it (and other agencies) from a future challenge. Meanwhile, Justice Thomas noted that he joined the majority opinion because the Court limited Humphrey’s Executor to agencies that do not wield substantial executive power.297 He even emphasized that clause in italics, perhaps as a flag to future litigants.298 It’s hard to read these passages as anything less than the first shots in the battle to extend the removal power to multimember commissions.

But here’s the thing: if the Court does expand the President’s preclusive removal power to cover multimember commissions for which

293 Seila, 140 S. Ct. at 2199–200 (emphasis added).
294 This rationale, of course, builds on Free Enterprise Fund. See Kevin M. Stack, Agency Independence After PCAOB, 32 CARDOZO L. REV. 2391, 2417 (2011) (arguing that “PCAOB embraces a principle — when an agency has policymaking and enforcement powers, the need for executive control trumps congressional concern for the agency’s independence in its exercise of adjudicative functions — that is not inherently confined to second-layer removal provisions”).
295 Seila, 140 S. Ct. at 2200.
296 Id. at 2339 n.10 (Kagan, J., concurring in part and dissenting in part).
297 Id. at 2211 (Thomas, J., concurring in part and dissenting in part).
298 See id.
Congress has specified removal criteria, that enterprise is also likely to have symmetrical first-order political effects. With an expansive removal power, a Democratic President could fire inherited Republican multimember commissioners and nominate new Republican commissioners — but ones who are more aligned with the President’s views. Alternatively, a Democratic President could fire Republican commissioners and leave their positions open, so long as quorum requirements are met to keep the agency functioning. In either case, a Democratic President could then direct the expansive powers of the Securities and Exchange Commission, the Federal Trade Commission, and the Federal Communications Commission, among other agencies. A Republican President could, of course, do the same. But that is the point. The first-order consequences do not obviously help Republicans or Democrats, conservatives or progressives. Whether we frame the President as a “decider” or “overseer” with respect to federal agencies does not have obvious first-order implications.299

That conservative presidential administrations and their movement allies have thus embraced the unitary theory is perhaps somewhat surprising, and maybe more so given the history of the presidency. In the late nineteenth century, the presidency was not at the center of the American political or constitutional universe. Woodrow Wilson’s classic 1885 book was entitled Congressional Government, not presidential government,300 and Lord Bryce felt obligated to include an entire chapter in his The American Commonwealth explaining why “great men” are not elected President.301

The transformation of the presidency happened with the Progressive Era. Constitutional scholars tend to recall President Theodore Roosevelt’s comments that the President was empowered to do virtually anything not prohibited by the Constitution.302 His approach may have been on the far end of the constitutional spectrum, but Progressive Era intellectuals generally pushed to expand the power of the presidency as part of an attempt to shift policymaking away from the constraints of courts and Congress.303 They believed that a less constrained President

299 See Peter L. Strauss, Foreword: Overseer, or “The Decider”? The President in Administrative Law, 75 GEO. WASH. L. REV. 696 (2007). Unitary executive champions, Strauss notes, tend to be on the “decider” side, and skeptics tend to think the Constitution either does not specify or sets up an overseer role. See id. at 697 n.3.
302 THEODORE ROOSEVELT, THEODORE ROOSEVELT: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY 510 (1913).
would be more attuned to the needs of democracy. Wilson thus claimed
the President was the “only national voice” in public affairs, and pro-
gressives saw Presidents as at once leading public opinion and being
regulated by it.304 This reimagining of the presidency was coupled with
a decades-long refashioning of administrative power from the cronyist,
patronage-focused spoils system of the nineteenth century to a more
expert-oriented enterprise that was decoupled from party machines and
bosses. At the same time, progressives were clear that their aim was not
a resurrection of the royal prerogative.305 “The modern president,”
Professor Stephen Skowronek writes, “would not direct affairs at will; he
would orchestrate the work of the whole according to commonly rec-
ognized and externally verifiable standards.”306

Presidential power and administrative capacity thus went hand in
hand, and the two were largely designed to advance the goals of eco-
nomic regulation. Rooseveltians wanted the federal government to reg-
ulate corporations.307 Brandeisians wanted the federal government to
break them up.308 Still others wanted federal-corporate collaboration to
stop “ruinous competition.”309 But in each case, the aim was federal power
to regulate economic activity — and this required both administrative ca-
pacity and presidential leadership. A generation later, President Franklin
Roosevelt pursued each of these courses at various times, using the
“bully pulpit” that his distant relative had christened to mobilize support
for a range of regulatory policies.310 More narrowly, it is worth pointing
out that it was Democrat Woodrow Wilson who fired Myers, and Dem-
ocrat Franklin Roosevelt who fired Humphrey. Progressives and their
Presidents championed presidential and administrative power largely in
order to bring the economically powerful to heel. If history is any guide,
we might even wonder if the unitary executive theory might one day
find favor with future progressive Presidents. But to even point out that
possibility is to recognize first-order political symmetry.

B. Why the Removal Power Is “Political”

Given the prominence of the case and the ferocity of the battles over
it, it seems unlikely that there is nothing deeper, nothing political, at
stake. So what are the possible “political” reasons why conservatives
are so supportive of a preclusive removal power? Or, alternatively, what
“political” features make progressives so fiercely opposed to it?

304 Id. at 19.
305 See id. at 18–20.
306 Id. at 20.
308 Id. at 178–81.
309 Id. at 174–85.
310 Id.
I think there are a number of possible explanations, and they can be divided into two categories. First are normative views of how the separation of powers should function. At times, the opinion in *Seila* reveals normative assumptions about constitutional dynamics and values that plausibly align with ideological divisions. Second are the consequences for the administrative state. Commentators often reference the rise of the removal power as tied to an assault on the administrative state, but it is not entirely clear what mechanism links the two (as compared, for example, to the nondelegation doctrine, which has an obvious first-order relationship to the administrative state). These two categories are not mutually exclusive, but separating them out — and separating out some of the different possibilities within each — helps identify the political stakes.311

1. Normative Views of the Separation of Powers. — By normative view of the separation of powers, I do not mean the best reading of the relevant legal materials on any particular provision. I mean that conservatives and liberals might have different views of what the Constitution should require, based on functional preferences or normative intuitions. In any given case, legal doctrines and interpretive methods might be deployed to achieve that constitutional vision. In *Seila* and the removal cases, at least three normative views of the separation of powers are identifiable.

First, and following one of Justice Kagan’s comments, is a kind of *Schoolhouse Rock constitutionalism*. In her dissent, Justice Kagan needed the majority for adopting an overly simplistic approach to constitutional structure, akin to the cartoon civics video’s explanation of the federal government.312 Her comments seem only partly in jest. It is possible that some people could have a normative commitment to such an approach. One could think the Constitution should adhere to a simple structure of three branches, totally separated, and that such an approach is net beneficial because it is simpler to administer or easier to explain to the general public. The trouble, of course, is that the *Schoolhouse Rock* Constitution is manifestly not our Constitution. Moving toward a simplified form is plainly a political choice, not a legal one.313

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311 It is worth noting that nothing about this analysis turns on whether members of the Court intentionally see themselves as advancing a political cause. They could have views that are “political” even if they do not see them that way. They could adopt interpretations that have “political” effects even if they are not motivated by those effects. They could also act in line with the conventional wisdom within their intellectual ecosystem, independent of how that wisdom came about or what its effects are. Part of my point here is that those possibilities do not make a decision or constitutional rule not “political.”


313 For a discussion opposed to this mode of constitutionalism, see Strauss, supra note 257, at 577–79.
A second view that emerges from the removal cases might be called strongman constitutionalism or, for the age of Donald Trump, the fetishization of firing. One of the striking things about Myers, Free Enterprise Fund, and Seila is their view of management and leadership. Without the removal power, Chief Justice Roberts said, quoting Myers, it “would make it impossible for the President . . . to take care that the laws be faithfully executed.” The reason is that officials in the executive branch will only “fear” and “obey” the “authority that can remove” them. “The threat of removal” is what enables control. As a result, any other elements that might be considered relevant to the political control of the bureaucracy — funding, personal relationships, oversight, political factors — are simply “bureaucratic minutiae.”

This overarching worldview — which depends on “fear” and “threat[s]” to get people to “obey” — seems to involve a strongman leader who controls the bureaucracy from the top down. Other commentators have called the removal power the “gun behind the door” because it enables the president to “bend” subordinates “to his will.” This approach is perhaps somewhat fitting for the moment, given that the current occupant of the White House’s most famous phrase is “You’re Fired.”

It is worth pointing out that there is nothing legal or constitutional about this approach — including the reasoning behind the removal power as a way to effectuate political control of the bureaucracy. Rather, this is a form of what Professors David Pozen and Adam Samaha have called “anti-modalities” in constitutional law. Pozen and Samaha show that functional arguments often seep into constitutional law, under the cover of accepted modalities of constitutional reasoning or by modification into shallow and superficial platitudes so as not to appear as “impermissible” policy arguments.

Indeed, the idea that everything but firing is “bureaucratic minutiae” and that firing is the only effective means of control would be a surprise to the entire field of political science, and much of administrative law too. Members of these fields have spent decades describing various

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314 Seila, 140 S. Ct. at 2198 (quoting Myers v. United States, 272 U.S. 52, 164 (1926)).
315 Id. at 2197 (quoting Bowsher v. Synar, 478 U.S. 714, 726 (1986)).
316 Id. at 2203.
321 Id.
forms of political control over the bureaucracy short of firing. Books and articles recount the many ways Congress exercises control over agencies; the ways Presidents exercise power over officials short of threatening to remove them; examples of situations in which a President cannot practically remove subordinates because of their independent power or leverage; and indeed, even the ways in which presidential removal might be unnecessary, ineffectual, or actually backfire and reduce political control of the bureaucracy.


325 See, e.g., MATTHEW C. STEPHENSON, OPTIMAL POLITICAL CONTROL OF THE BUREAUCRACY, 107 MICH. L. REV. 53, 68–69 (2008); AZIZ Z. HUQ, REMOVAL AS A POLITICAL QUESTION, 65 STAN. L. REV. 1, 6 (2013) (“Empirical evidence and political science models instead show that the power to remove is sometimes unnecessary and sometimes ineffectual to the goal of political control of the bureaucracy. Worse, presidential removal authority often has perverse and undesirable effects quite apart from democratic accountability goals.”); id. at 39 (“Removal may not only be unnecessary given the extant instruments of agency control wielded by a supervising official; it may also be ineffectual because it is too costly, too clumsy, and too molar a tool for attaining desired policy results. As a result of these limitations, even a supervising official who has no other instruments of agency control will not necessarily find her ability to elicit desirable policy outcomes increased in any meaningful way by a judicial intervention reallocating removal power.”); ROBERT V. PERCIVAL, PRESIDENTIAL MANAGEMENT OF THE ADMINISTRATIVE STATE: THE NOT-SO-UNITARY EXECUTIVE, 51 DUKE L.J. 963, 1003 (2000) (arguing that even with removal, Presidents cannot direct subordinates to take substantive positions on issues about which they are legally entitled to make decisions). Note also that
In other words, there are a range of views on how best to control bureaucracies, including debates over whether presidential control through removal is the optimal way to do so. The vision of Presidents governing the bureaucracy through “fear” and “threat[s]” is one approach to management. But it is not the only one. And it is also hard to believe that the generation that overthrew a king would have endorsed it. For our purposes, however, the point is not that political control of the bureaucracy through fear and threats is the right or wrong approach. It is that it is fundamentally a choice — and a contested one — to govern in that way. The Court, as Justice Kagan says, “has nothing but intuition to back up its essentially functionalist claim that the CFPB would be less capable of exercising power if it had more than one Director.”326 It also has nothing but intuition to back up its essentially functionalist claim that at-will removal is necessary for political control of the bureaucracy.

A brief sidebar: if members of the Court do take this view of managerial dynamics, it likely implies that they see themselves as completely unaccountable. Unlike the President, they are not subject to elections, and any other mechanism of political control over the judiciary would be, in the Chief Justice’s words, “bureaucratic minutiae.” To the extent the Justices do feel disciplined by other factors, such as public opinion, then their intuition about the essential role the threat of firing plays is inconsistent with their own behavior and experience.

In any case, conservatives might support strongman constitutionalism for functional reasons. They could think it is the most effective (or only effective) way to “take care” that the laws are faithfully executed. Another possibility is that the roots of strongman constitutionalism are psychological. In his book The Righteous Mind, Professor Jonathan Haidt argues that conservatives differ from liberals at the level of deep psychological intuitions, particularly with respect to their commitment to hierarchy.327 Political scientists have similarly suggested that divergences of this type can explain a great number of policy differences.328 It is possible that either some psychological impetus, or more weakly, simply an intuition in favor of hierarchy, is at the source of conservatives’ general preference for the removal power, the unitary executive, and the system of management that undergirds both. Given that there

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326 Seila, 140 S. Ct. at 2244 (Kagan, J., concurring in part and dissenting in part).
is nothing “legal” or “constitutional” about psychological biases, if Seila is based in part on these intuitions, it should be seen as political.

A third view is of libertarian constitutionalism. Conservatives might hold a normative position that the Constitution should put a thumb on the scale against federal power generally and economic regulation specifically. This libertarian vision often seeps into constitutional arguments, with the libertarian anti-modality masquerading as constitutional reasoning. For example, the Supreme Court frequently argues that the separation of powers exists, in part, to safeguard individual liberty. Seila continues this trend, claiming that “[t]he Framers recognized that, in the long term, structural protections against abuse of power were critical to preserving liberty.” This libertarian separation of powers argument suggests that it is essential to prevent the accumulation of power to preserve freedom from government tyranny, and is offered in defense of a formalist reading of the structural separation of powers principle. But the argument says nothing about the ability of government to protect individuals from private tyranny. As one scholar has noted, “it can be just as oppressive to prevent government from operating as to hijack its operation for factional ends.”

This concern, at least as much as the libertarian one, motivated the Framers to create the Constitution. Constitutionalism, as scholars have

long observed, involves both creating capacity for government and controlling government, both building power and constraining it.\(^{335}\) As Madison wrote in *The Federalist No. 51*, “[i]n framing a government . . . the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself.”\(^{336}\) Indeed, the entire purpose of the creation of the U.S. Constitution was to make the national government *stronger* than the government under the Articles of Confederation.\(^{337}\)

The CFPB offers an excellent illustration. The agency was created after widespread private discrimination and fraud collapsed the national and global economies, with devastating consequences for individuals’ lives and livelihoods. The actors who perpetrated those frauds then fought tooth and nail to prevent regulation of their behavior. The CFPB, as Justice Kagan pointed out, has recovered more than $11 billion for consumers who were cheated by financial institutions.\(^{338}\)

What motivates *Seila*, however, seems to be the hypothetical possibility of “kneebuckling penalties against private citizens” rather than the fact that some private citizens took a financial baseball bat to the knees of other private citizens.\(^{339}\) Indeed, Chief Justice Roberts’s description of the circumstances around the creation of the CFPB makes no mention of discrimination, fraud, tricks, traps, deception, or any other illegal, unfair, or problematic practices. Rather, he characterized the 2008 crisis as coming (passively) when “the subprime mortgage market collapsed,” and Warren’s feeling that products were “unsafe” as simply about the “regulatory jumble.”\(^{340}\)

For our purposes, the point is not whether the danger of government issuing “kneebuckling penalties” is more or less than the danger of private actors engaging in discrimination and fraud. It is that the “safeguards of liberty” principle smuggles into separation of powers debates an


\(^{337}\) See generally MAX M. EDLING, A REVOLUTION IN FAVOR OF GOVERNMENT: ORIGINS OF THE U.S. CONSTITUTION AND THE MAKING OF THE AMERICAN STATE 5 (2003); MICHAEL J. KLARMAN, THE FAMERS’ COUP: THE MAKING OF THE UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION (2016); GANESH SITARAMAN, THE CRISIS OF THE MIDDLE-CLASS CONSTITUTION (2017); Levinson, supra note 335, at 47 (“The overarching ambition of the constitutional Framers was to create a centralized government powerful enough to fulfill the fiscal and military requirements of respectable statehood.”).

\(^{338}\) *Seila*, 140 S. Ct. at 2239 (Kagan, J., concurring in part and dissenting in part).

\(^{339}\) *Id.* at 2202 n.8 (majority opinion). Judge Pillard made this point nicely in *PHH Corp. v. CFPB*, 881 F.3d 75, 106 (D.C. Cir. 2018) (en banc) (“It remains unexplained why we would assess the challenged removal restriction with reference to the liberty of financial services providers, and not more broadly to the liberty of the individuals and families who are their customers.”).

\(^{340}\) *Seila*, 140 S. Ct. at 2192. To be sure, Warren was concerned with a regulatory jumble. But the reason was because it meant that bad practices were not penalized and bad actors in the financial markets were often not held accountable. *See* Warren, supra note 4.
assumption that the libertarian concern is stronger than the government-capacity concern. This is the Safeguards of Liberty Fallacy\textsuperscript{341}: even if the principle captures something important at a high level of theoretical generality, it tells us nothing about how any given case should come out because it is contravened by the equal and opposite principle of needing to enable a strong government in order to prevent private tyranny. Placing a thumb on the scale for the libertarian approach is a contested political preference.

2. Consequences of Reducing Agency Independence. — \textit{Seila} might also be seen as political because there are asymmetric political consequences to creating a presidential removal power — even if they are not first-order political consequences. Scholars and commentators frequently say that the political stakes in removal cases include the existence and capacity of the administrative state.\textsuperscript{342} At this high level of generality, however, it is not clear how exactly that threat manifests. Progressive Presidents could, of course, use unitary removal powers to expand the regulatory state. This makes removal different from the nondelegation doctrine, which has clear first-order consequences for the administrative state.\textsuperscript{343} In this section, I consider some of the specific mechanisms by which the removal power could be asymmetrically “political” with respect to the administrative state — in ways that might explain the ideological divide.

We might call the first possibility \textit{asymmetric bureaucracy}. This possibility operates at the level of both agency leadership (commissioners and agency directors) and civil service bureaucrats. Conservatives might think that the civil service is largely liberal ideologically and that agencies with leadership that is insulated from removal might be more likely to operate in the center-left of the political spectrum. With this assumption, a presidential removal power could potentially have an asymmetric effect on the bureaucracy. Firing liberal or moderately conservative agency leaders could make room for more conservative leaders who can then direct the civil service in line with conservative preferences. And even if they encounter a “deep state” that will not implement conservative positions, conservative agency leaders would at least have the power to stop the civil service from taking liberal actions.\textsuperscript{344}

Whether or not distrust of “liberal” civil servants is warranted, a blanket fear of a liberal bureaucracy does not appear to be. There is some evidence there are more liberal federal employees than conservative ones, but the differences might not be as great as those who worry

\textsuperscript{341} See Sitaraman & Dobkin, supra note 66, at 735–37.
\textsuperscript{342} See, e.g., Metzger, supra note 64, at 17–20.
\textsuperscript{343} Lawson, supra note 329, at 1237–41.
about deep state conspiracies think. In addition, political scientists Mark Richardson, Joshua Clinton, and David Lewis have shown that the bureaucracy is not monolithic in its ideology. Some agencies are perceived to slant conservative, while others are perceived to be liberal. And it is not clear that agencies with removal protections are systematically more liberal than agencies under the eye of the President. The Defense Department comes close to maxing out the Richardson-Clinton-Lewis scale on the conservative side, while the Department of Health and Human Services is the mirror image on the liberal side. Neither has congressionally specified removal criteria for its leadership. The SEC and CFTC, commissions with independence from presidential removal, are perceived to lean conservative; the CFPB and the Consumer Products Safety Commission, liberal. Within agencies, there is also variation, with some offices considered more conservative than others.

The choices between a single-director agency and a multimember commission and between removal protections or their absence are also often conflated. Separating the two does not help much, at least logically, in identifying a systematic skew either. An EPA that oscillates between conservatives and liberals does not seem so different than the Cordray-Mulvaney divide at the CFPB. Indeed, some might contend that a CFPB that oscillates between conservatives and progressives will, on net, be more progressive than an SEC that is relatively conservative regardless of the partisan composition of the Commission.

The need for multiple votes, asymmetric partisan polarization (among commissioners), the Democratic coalition’s balance between progressives and centrists, and a host of other factors arguably combine to ensure that

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346 Mark D. Richardson, Joshua D. Clinton & David E. Lewis, Elite Perceptions of Agency Ideology and Workforce Skill, 80 J. POL. 303, 307 fig. 3, app. at 11–16 (2018); Lewis, supra note 345.

347 Lewis, supra note 345.

348 Richardson et al., supra note 346, at 307.

349 Id. at 305.

350 Sitaraman & Dobkin, supra note 66, at 722–23.

351 Id. at 731.
multimember commissions will not be terribly progressive, even though commissioners are not removable at will.\footnote{352 See generally id. Indeed, in other work, I have called for making the FTC into a single-director agency for these reasons. See Ganesh Sitaraman, Taking Antitrust Away from the Courts 11, Great Democracy Initiative (Sept. 2018), https://greatdemocracyinitiative.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Taking-Antitrust-Away-from-the-Courts-Report-092018-3.pdf [https://perma.cc/NHX3-GBZ9].}

It is also not clear that a civil servant in an agency whose leadership is removable will exert more independent power over policy than will their counterpart in an agency whose leadership is not removable. It might instead be that civil servants in both cases take direction faithfully from the agency leadership — or that civil servants in both cases disobey guidance from agency leadership.\footnote{353 See Jennifer Nou, Civil Service Disobedience, 94 CHI.-KENT L. REV. 349, 357 (2019). For an argument that civil servants, political leadership, and outside groups create a new separation of powers, see Jon D. Michaels, An Enduring, Evolving Separation of Powers, 115 COLUM. L. REV. 515 (2015).} Similarly, accounts of removable political appointees taking aggressive actions that even push civil servants to the point of resignation do not seem so far from Director Mulvaney’s aggressive actions as the nonremovable head of the CFPB.\footnote{354 Compare supra pp. 356–57, with Heidi Kitrosser, Accountability in the Deep State, 65 UCLA L. REV. 1532, 1535–36 (2018) (describing the complaints and resignation of a civil servant at the Department of the Interior).} And of course, civil service disobedience can take place in both Republican and Democratic administrations.\footnote{355 Nou, supra note 353, at 351.} In any case, political scientists have found that civil servants report that their senior ranks are responsive or very responsive to the policy decisions of the President.\footnote{356 Lewis, supra note 345.} In a Democratic administration, liberal agencies are more responsive than conservative agencies, and the opposite is likely true as well.\footnote{357 Id.}

Still, regardless of accuracy or precision, it remains possible that the politics of the removal power are based on some general impression that the administrative state is liberal — and an assumption that presidential removal can rein in a liberal bureaucracy.

A second possibility is asymmetric presidential administration. It might be that conservatives think that Democrats and Republicans are asymmetrically polarized not just in their political views,\footnote{358 Jacob S. Hacker & Paul Pierson, Off Center: The Republican Revolution and the Erosion of American Democracy 11 (2005).} their willingness to fill judicial positions,\footnote{359 See David Fontana, Cooperative Judicial Nominations During the Obama Administration, 2017 WIS. L. REV. 385, 396.} or their willingness to play political
and constitutional hardball — but also their willingness to have the President wield the powers of the administrative state. Democrats might be systematically unwilling to appoint officials who are progressive and to use the administrative state aggressively for regulatory ends. Republicans might be systematically willing to appoint extreme conservatives and to use the administrative state aggressively for deregulatory ends. In that case, the removal authority would mean a net benefit over time for conservatives.

The history of the Reagan Justice Department’s actions suggests an understanding of the possibilities of using legal authorities and arguments aggressively to change the terms of policy and politics. So long as conservatives were ahead of the curve in recognizing and using those tactics, the removal power and the broader unitary theory would have asymmetric effects. Some might argue that progressives also use presidential power aggressively, potentially making this explanation less valuable. But even with President Clinton’s use of presidential administration and President Obama’s often creative regulatory endeavors, it may be that presidential administration is asymmetrically polarized. The Trump Administration’s approach to the CFPB, for example, has been far more radically deregulatory than the CFPB was regulatory in its early years.

More broadly, given the historical relationship between progressives and the presidency, the recent example of President Obama’s use of executive authorities, and the challenges of retaining unified government, one might think Democrats might even come to embrace the unitary theory as a way to accomplish their policy goals. There are a variety of practical and political reasons why an asymmetry in views of the unitary theory is likely to persist — including Democrats’ tendency to a technocratic form of governance, the heterogeneity of the Democratic political coalition, industry capture and the divide between left-neoliberals and progressives, and fears that playing hardball will backfire — but it is also worth noting a set of intellectual commitments within the left that make ideological drift along these lines unlikely.


361 Hollis-Brusky, supra note 186, at 199.


Democrats might potentially be willing to support a unitary theory when it comes to the regulatory state but not the national security state. Civil libertarian fears with respect to war and criminal justice push against building state capacity, even though state capacity is also needed to combat economic power and address economic injustice. General theories of state power thus run up against these policy preferences. Indeed, Democrats tend to be internally divided between liberals, who are more concerned with individual rights, and progressives, who are more concerned with building structures of power.\textsuperscript{365} This divide might make progressives more willing to build executive power than liberals, even with the attendant risks, but the fractured coalition may make adopting the theory more difficult.

Interestingly, liberals and progressives could develop a structural constitutional or political theory that might account for these challenges. Constitutional theorists speak frequently of foreign affairs or national security exceptionalism, with those realms warranting greater executive power and judicial deference than domestic affairs.\textsuperscript{366} But one could imagine progressives developing a theory of national security exceptionalism that cuts in the opposite direction. Given the particular dangers of state power over life itself and a range of hawkish biases that affect individual and group decisionmaking,\textsuperscript{367} controls on state power should arguably be more stringent in these sectors, not less, than in the economic realm — or at least equally stringent.\textsuperscript{368} A theory along these lines would parallel the divide between economic regulation and personal rights that emerged through the New Deal settlement, but at the level of structure rather than rights.\textsuperscript{369}

A third, and closely related, possibility might be thought of as what Steve Bannon called the “deconstruction of the administrative state.”\textsuperscript{370}

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\item \textsuperscript{365} On the liberal legacy, see Laura Kalman, The Strange Career of Legal Liberalism 145 (1996).
\item \textsuperscript{367} Ganesh Sitaraman & David Zionts, Behavioral War Powers, 90 N.Y.U. L. Rev. 516, 521 (2015).
\item \textsuperscript{368} As a constitutional theory, this would of course be subject to specific textual provisions. As a matter of policy, divides between foreign and domestic could be justified based on specific functional needs, rather than over- and underinclusive categories like foreign and domestic. See Sitaraman & Wuerth, supra note 366, at 1935–49; see also Ganesh Sitaraman, Foreign Hard Look Review, 66 Admin. L. Rev. 489, 525–32 (2014).
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Progressive-era reformers saw the administrative state as “the only institution capable of securing a competitive economy and fair society,” and their opponents thus saw it as “an intrinsic threat to personal freedom and private ordering.”

Conservatives might therefore want to undermine it. There are two linked, asymmetric mechanisms at work. The first is the asymmetry in building and breaking. In his book *Political Order and Political Decay*, Professor Francis Fukuyama argues that institutions can suffer from political decay if they fail to reform and update to changed conditions. He notes that dysfunction and entrenched actors in the United States contribute to this decay. But active efforts to break institutional capacity do as well. As he describes in great detail, building institutional capacity and reforming institutions is difficult work. If it is easier to break an institution than it is to build it, easier to erode capacity than to generate it, then greater presidential control might have asymmetric effects that benefit those who want to break institutional capacity more than those who want to strengthen it. Expansive presidential power is particularly important for this project if proponents cannot get the votes or political support to pass legislation eliminating agencies altogether.

The “deconstruction of the administrative state” might not simply mean a desire to deregulate or reduce the capacity of the regulatory state. It is possible that the aim is to delegitimize the administrative state altogether. Here, the removal power could have asymmetric effects through the mechanism of making the federal government more partisan and more responsive to presidential preferences. While removal is not the only and perhaps not even the most important element of agency independence, it is clear, concrete, and perhaps symbolically important. Members of agencies who hold norms and follow practices of independence might see their own roles differently if the agency head is formally removable at will — precisely because that power is attached to the unitary theory. In addition, if the public increasingly sees “expert” agencies as little more than arms of partisans, subject to the whims of the President and staffed with the President’s cronies, then the entire

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Id. at 503–04.

This is the subject of both volumes of his work on the topic. *See id.;* Francis Fukuyama, *The Origins of Political Order* (2011).

For a discussion related to the use of antigovernment rhetoric, see Metzger, supra note 64, at 50 (“[T]he Court’s rhetorical invocations of liberty-threatening bureaucrats . . . undermine[] the administrative state’s sociological and moral legitimacy . . . .”).

expertise-based administrative enterprise might increasingly appear illegitimate. This could be based on an opposition to expertise in itself or to governance by semiautonomous experts.

Delegitimizing the expert-based administrative state would have multiple consequences. It would undermine the existing administrative state’s operations and also reduce the likelihood of future innovations and the development of administrative capacity to address new problems that emerge. Importantly, reducing the legitimacy of the administrative state could also have a spiraling effect, by which, as Fukuyama has explained, “[d]istrust of executive agencies leads [to] demands for more legal checks on administration, which further reduces the quality and effectiveness of government by reducing bureaucratic autonomy.” The consequence would be a vicious cycle that keeps eroding bureaucratic institutions and public confidence in them.

The fourth and final explanation rests on constitutional political economy. The policy fights over the CFPB — and the PCAOB — were fiercely contested because they were fundamentally about the regulation of economically powerful actors. Most commentators in recent years have focused on the First Amendment as the constitutional weapon of choice in facilitating a deregulatory policy agenda. Another tactic is narrowing the scope of the Commerce Clause, an approach that has enjoyed an occasional revival in both the Rehnquist and Roberts Courts. The First Amendment operates as an external limit on congressional power; the new Commerce Clause jurisprudence acts as an internal limit.

Seila and Free Enterprise Fund might be seen as another front in the war over constitutional political economy, with the site of the battle

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377 See generally Tom Nichols, The Death of Expertise (2017) (describing the rise of skepticism of experts and expertise).
379 Metzger, supra note 64, at 50; see also Jeremy K. Kessler, The Struggle for Administrative Legitimacy, 129 Harv. L. Rev. 718, 771 (2016) (reviewing Daniel R. Ernst, Tocqueville’s Nightmare: The Administrative State Emerges in America, 1900–1940 (2014)).
being the Necessary and Proper Clause. The cases, and the unitary theory itself, are framed around giving content to unspecified Article II powers. The constant reference to “all” executive power broadens the scope of that unspecified power, while individual cases help articulate its content. But unitary theory conservatives never seem to reference “all” of Congress’s Necessary and Proper power. As we have seen, the Seila majority does not mention the clause at all. The unitary executive theory’s expansion of preclusive Article II powers may therefore be as much about shrinking Congress’s textually granted and extremely broad Article I Necessary and Proper power. Seila could thus be read in conjunction with the creation of the recognition power in Zivotofsky II; with the Court’s recent opinions shrinking the Necessary and Proper Clause, like NFIB v. Sebelius; and with its broader First Amendment and Commerce Clause jurisprudence constraining Congress’s power to regulate.

If Seila, the removal power, and the modern rise of the unitary executive theory are indeed part of a broader battle to reduce the power of Congress, the political context of the mid-twentieth century was likely an important contributing factor. From 1933 until 1995 — a total of sixty-two years — Democrats held the House of Representatives for fifty-eight years. During those same sixty-two years, Democrats held the Senate for fifty-two. But partisan control over the presidency was far more evenly divided — twenty-eight years for Republicans and thirty-four years for Democrats. The result is that for decades a Democratic Congress passed legislation and created agencies with economic and general welfare missions that differed from conservative preferences. Conservatives might have noticed that increasing presidential powers and reducing congressional power would be to their benefit because they were more likely to take control of the presidency than Congress. When the unitary executive theory and the modern drive for a removal power emerged in the 1980s, Republicans had held power in

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388 See sources cited supra note 382.


Congress for only four years in almost a half-century — and the last time had been more than twenty-five years earlier.

At a structural level, reducing the scope of Article I powers to regulate does have asymmetrical political consequences even beyond which party controls Congress. It systematically restrains Congress’s ability to develop creative, innovative solutions to regulate challenging, novel, contested policy issues — from political corruption and cronyism to interest group capture and economic power. Indeed, the CFPB was deliberately designed in order to insulate the agency from capture by financial institutions — directly and indirectly via a captured Congress or captured President. Holding Congress to only the agency designs it adopted centuries ago (and taking a blinkered view of those designs too) will have significant consequences — and those consequences align with ideological divides between conservatives and progressives on political economy.

Each of these four possibilities is speculative, of course, and particularly as to motivations. But they are not mutually exclusive. It is possible that with decades of Democratic control of Congress and power over the legislative agenda, conservatives believed that Congress passed laws that regulated the economically powerful too aggressively and created agencies to implement those laws that were staffed by liberal personnel. Unable to eliminate these agencies altogether through the legislative process, strong Republican Presidents could aggressively exercise the powers of appointment and administrative oversight to break down these agencies. Democratic Presidents would have a harder time building them back up, for both political and institutional reasons. Premeditated or not, the result of these interlocking asymmetries would be to undo the New Deal-era administrative state and its system of political economy.

CONCLUSION

“When should courts be responsible for designing federal administrative agencies?” Professor Aziz Huq has asked. The obvious answer, one might think, is never. But between Free Enterprise Fund and Seila, the Supreme Court has now inserted itself into fiercely contested political battles twice in a decade, and without terribly persuasive textual, structural, or historical reasoning. The Court might not want to say so,

391 For discussions of the Rehnquist Court’s “constitutional revolution” that emphasize restrictions on congressional power, see Jack M. Balkin & Sanford Levinson, Understanding the Constitutional Revolution, 87 VA. L. REV. 1045 (2001); and Dawn E. Johnsen, Ronald Reagan and the Rehnquist Court on Congressional Power: Presidential Influences on Constitutional Change, 78 IND. L.J. 363 (2003).
392 See generally, e.g., Barkow, supra note 32 (identifying some of the ways in which agencies can be insulated from capture).
393 Huq, supra note 325, at 1.
but “personnel is policy,” whether in the specific choices of individuals or in structuring their offices.

My aim in this Comment has been to show that Seila is a political case in more ways than one. The CFPB emerged and persisted in spite of a relentless assault on its existence. That battle took it to the Supreme Court, where it met an impressive decades-long effort to articulate and legitimize the unitary executive theory and a preclusive removal power. Those legal theories, in turn, might depend on normative views of the Constitution, and they likely have asymmetric political effects — though not the first-order effects that characterize many “political” issues that make it to the Supreme Court. Debates over constitutional structure might seem esoteric, with discussions of obscure historical events and attempts to divine meaning from a text that is at once concise and general. But that does not necessarily make them any less political than cases that normally carry that moniker.