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In memory of my father, Russell E. Harriger (1923–2010) — Katy J. Harriger
Summary of Contents

INTRODUCTION xix
1 CONSTITUTIONAL POLITICS 3
2 THE DOCTRINE OF JUDICIAL REVIEW 33
3 THRESHOLD REQUIREMENTS: HUSBANDING POWER AND PRESTIGE 75
4 JUDICIAL ORGANIZATION 115
5 DECISION MAKING: PROCESS AND STRATEGY 141
6 SEPARATION OF POWERS: DOMESTIC CONFLICTS 165
7 SEPARATION OF POWERS: EMERGENCIES AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS 253
8 FEDERAL-STATE RELATIONS 313
9 ECONOMIC LIBERTIES 397
10 FREE SPEECH IN A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY 443
11 FREEDOM OF THE PRESS 505
12 RELIGIOUS FREEDOM 565
13 DUE PROCESS OF LAW 635
14 SEARCH AND SEIZURE 713
15 RACIAL DISCRIMINATION 771
16 THE EXPANSION OF EQUAL PROTECTION 845
17 RIGHTS OF PRIVACY 907
18 POLITICAL PARTICIPATION 969
19 EFFORTS TO CURB THE COURT 1047
APPENDICES 1083
TABLE OF CASES 1111
INDEX 1155
# Contents

**About the Authors**  
 xv

**Acknowledgments**  
 xvii

**Introduction**  
 xix

## 1 CONSTITUTIONAL POLITICS  
 3

A. Litigation as a Political Process  
 5

B. Lobbying the Courts  
 7

C. The Executive in Court  
 9

Reading:  
  
*Steel Seizure Case of 1952: Oral Argument Before the District Court*  
 12

D. Congressional Duties  
 13

Reading:  
  
*Raines v. Byrd*,  
 521 U.S. 811 (1997)  
 16

E. Judge as Lawmaker  
 18

F. Judge as Administrator  
 19

G. Independent State Action  
 21

H. Who Has the “Last Word”?  
 22

Reading:  
  
*Congress Responds to the Sedition Act*  
 24

*Jackson’s Veto of the Bank Bill*  
 25

*The Senate Debates Jackson’s Veto Message*  
 26

*Lincoln’s Critique of Dred Scott*  
 28

*WALTER F. MURPHY, Who Shall Interpret?*  
 29

**Reading:**  
  
*Eakin v. Raub: Gibson’s Dissent*,  
 12 S. & R. 330 (Pa. 1825)  
 38

**Reading:**  
  
*The Boundaries of Judicial Review: Interview with Justice Powell*  
 44

**Reading:**  
  
*The Doctrine of Original Intent: Attorney General Meese versus Justice Brennan*  
 47

**Reading:**  
  
*The Natural Law Debate: Frankfurter Against Black*  
 47

**Reading:**  
  
*Stare Decisis*  
 47

Notes and Questions  
 50

Selected Readings  
 51

## 2 THE DOCTRINE OF JUDICIAL REVIEW  
 75

A. Sources of Judicial Review Authority  
 75

Reading:  
  
*ALEXANDER HAMILTON, Federalist No. 78*  
 76

C. The Road to Marbury  
 81

Reading:  
  
*Eakin v. Raub: Gibson’s Dissent*,  
 12 S. & R. 330 (Pa. 1825)  
 86

**Reading:**  
  
*The Boundaries of Judicial Review: Interview with Justice Powell*  
 90

**Reading:**  
  
*The Doctrine of Original Intent: Attorney General Meese versus Justice Brennan*  
 93

**Reading:**  
  
*The Natural Law Debate: Frankfurter Against Black*  
 96

Notes and Questions  
 99

Selected Readings  
 100

## 3 THRESHOLD REQUIREMENTS: HUSBANDING POWER AND PRESTIGE  
 107

A. Cases and Controversies  
 107

Reading:  
  
*Ashwander v. TVA (The Brandeis Rules),*  
 297 U.S. 288 (1936)  
 112

B. Standing to Sue  
 113

Reading:  
  
*Frothingham v. Mellon*,  
 262 U.S. 447 (1923)  
 117

**Reading:**  
  
*Ashwander v. TVA (The Brandeis Rules),*  
 297 U.S. 288 (1936)  
 122

**Reading:**  
  
*Frothingham v. Mellon*,  
 262 U.S. 447 (1923)  
 126

Notes and Questions  
 127

Selected Readings  
 128

Martin v. Hunter’s Lessee,  
 14 U.S. (1 Wheat.) 304 (1816)  
 132

Cohens v. Virginia,  
 19 U.S. (6 Wheat.) 264 (1821)  
 136

D. Constraints on Judicial Review  
 137

Reading:  
  
*Eakin v. Raub: Gibson’s Dissent*,  
 12 S. & R. 330 (Pa. 1825)  
 142

Notes and Questions  
 143

Selected Readings  
 144

vii
CONTENTS

D. Ripeness 97
  Reading:
  Poe v. Ullman, 367 U.S. 497 (1961) 100
E. Political Questions 101
  Readings:
  Virtues and Vices: Bickel versus Gunther 109
F. Equitable Discretion 111
  Notes and Questions 111
  Selected Readings 112

4 JUDICIAL ORGANIZATION 115
A. Federal Court System 115
B. Legislative and Specialized Courts 119
C. The Appointment Process 123
  Reading:
  Nomination Hearings of Sandra Day O'Connor 128
D. Tenure, Removal, and Compensation 129
E. Judicial Lobbying 134
  Reading:
  Burger on Judicial Lobbying 138
  Notes and Questions 139
  Selected Readings 139

5 DECISION MAKING: PROCESS AND STRATEGY 141
A. Jurisdiction: Original and Appellate 142
B. The Writ of Certiorari 143
  Reading:
  DAVID LAUTER, Certiorari Strategies 146
C. From Oral Argument to Decision 147
  Reading:
  FRANK M. COFFIN, The Process of Writing a Decision* 154
D. Unanimity and Dissent 155
  Readings:
  WILLIAM O. DOUGLAS, The Dissent: A Safeguard of Democracy 159
  ROBERT H. JACKSON, The Limitation of Dissent 160
E. Caseload Burdens 161
  Notes and Questions 163
  Selected Readings 163

6 SEPARATION OF POWERS: DOMESTIC CONFLICTS 165
A. The Separation Doctrine 165
  Readings:
  Congress Interprets the Ineligibility Clause 169
  Presidential Signing Statements and Congressional Response 171
  Response in Congress to Signing Statement Controversy 172
  Madison's Analysis of the Separation Doctrine 173
B. Presidential Power 175
  Reading:
  Hamilton on Executive Power 176
C. Creating the Executive Departments 178
  Readings:
  Attorney General Opinion on Ministerial Duties 185
D. Appointments and Removals 189
  Readings:
  Buckley v. Valeo, 424 U.S. 1 (1976) 192
  OLC Memo on President Obama's Recess Appointments (2012) 195
  Myers v. United States, 272 U.S. 52 (1926) 197
  Humphrey's Executor v. United States, 295 U.S. 602 (1935) 200
E. Delegation of Legislative Power 206
  Readings:
  Hampton & Co. v. United States, 276 U.S. 394 (1928) 209
  Schechter Corp. v. United States, 295 U.S. 495 (1935) 211
F. Congressional Oversight 213
  Readings:
  LOUIS FISHER, Legislative Vetoes After Chadha 223
G. Investigations and Executive Privilege 225
  Readings:
  Watkins v. United States, 354 U.S. 178 (1957) 231
  Barenblatt v. United States, 360 U.S. 109 (1959) 234
  Negotiating Executive Privilege: The AT&T Cases 239
7 SEPARATION OF POWERS:  
EMERGENCIES AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS  253  
A. External and Internal Affairs  253  
Readings:  
United States v. Curtiss-Wright Corp.,  
299 U.S. 304 (1936)  256  
Congress Interprets Curtiss-Wright:  
The Iran-Contra Report  258  
Haig v. Agee,  
453 U.S. 280 (1981)  259  
B. An Executive Prerogative?  262  
Readings:  
The Prize Cases,  
2 Black (67 U.S.) 635 (1863)  265  
Ex parte Milligan,  
4 Wall. (71 U.S.) 2 (1866)  268  
Korematsu v. United States,  
323 U.S. 214 (1944)  269  
Youngstown Co. v. Sawyer,  
343 U.S. 579 (1952)  271  
New York Times Co. v. United States,  
403 U.S. 713 (1971)  275  
Erwin N. Griswold, How Sensitive  
Were the "Pentagon Papers"?  276  
C. Treaties and Executive Agreements  278  
Readings:  
Goldwater v. Carter,  
444 U.S. 996 (1979)  282  
Dames & Moore v. Regan,  
453 U.S. 654 (1981)  283  
D. The War Power  286  
Readings:  
Military Operations in Libya,  
OLC opinion  295  
Hamdi v. Rumsfeld,  
Hamdan v. Rumsfeld,  
548 U.S. 557 (2006)  298  
Boumediene v. Bush,  
553 U.S. 723 (2008)  300  
War Powers Resolution  303  
Dellums v. Bush,  
Campbell v. Clinton,  
203 F.3d 19 (D.C. Cir. 2000)  307  
E. Rights of Citizenship  308  
Conclusions  310  
Notes and Questions  310  
Selected Readings  310  
8 FEDERAL-STATE RELATIONS  313  
A. The Principle of Federalism  313  
Readings:  
McCulloch v. Maryland,  
17 U.S. 315 (1819)  319  
Missouri v. Holland,  
252 U.S. 416 (1920)  323  
B. The Commerce Clause  324  
Readings:  
Gibbons v. Ogden,  
22 U.S. (9 Wheat.) 1 (1824)  328  
Cooley v. Board of Wardens,  
53 U.S. 299 (1852)  330  
C. Nationalization of the Economy  331  
Readings:  
Champion v. Ames (Lottery Case),  
188 U.S. 321 (1903)  333  
Hammer v. Dagenhart,  
247 U.S. 251 (1918)  335  
D. The New Deal Watershed  337  
Readings:  
Carter v. Carter Coal Co.,  
298 U.S. 238 (1936)  340  
NLRB v. Jones & Laughlin,  
301 U.S. 1 (1937)  342  
United States v. Darby,  
312 U.S. 100 (1941)  345  
Wickard v. Filburn,  
317 U.S. 111 (1942)  346  
E. From National League to Garcia  349  
Readings:  
National League of Cities v. Usery,  
426 U.S. 833 (1976)  350  
Garcia v. San Antonio Metro.  
Transit Auth.,  
469 U.S. 528 (1985)  352  
F. State Powers Revived  354  
Readings:  
United States v. Lopez,  
United States v. Morrison,  
529 U.S. 598 (2000)  362  
Gonzales v. Raich,  
545 U.S. 1 (2005)  365  
G. The Spending and Taxing Powers  367  
Readings:  
Bailey v. Drexel Furniture Co.  
(Child Labor Tax Case),  
259 U.S. 20 (1922)  370  
Steward Machine Co. v. Davis,  
301 U.S. 548 (1937)  371
CONTENTS

9 ECONOMIC LIBERTIES

A. The Meaning of Property 397
   Reading:
   Madison's Essay on Property* 398
B. The Contract Clause 399
   Readings:
   Calder v. Bull,
   3 U.S. (3 Dall.) 385 (1798) 402
   Fletcher v. Peck,
   10 U.S. (6 Cr.) 87 (1810) 404
   Dartmouth College v. Woodward,
   17 U.S. (4 Wheat.) 517 (1819) 405
   Charles River Bridge v. Warren Bridge,
   36 U.S. (11 Pet.) 420 (1837) 407
   Home Bldg. & Loan Assn. v. Blaisdell,
   290 U.S. 398 (1934) 409
C. The Taking Clause 411
   Readings:
   Hawaii Housing Authority v. Midkiff,
   Kelo v. City of New London,
   545 U.S. 488 (2005) 419
   Congress Responds to Kelo 421
D. The Police Power 422
   Readings:
   Slaughter-House Cases,
   16 Wall. 36 (1873) 424
   Munn v. Illinois,
   94 U.S. 113 (1877) 426
E. Substantive Due Process 428
   Readings:
   Lochner v. New York,
   198 U.S. 45 (1905) 432
   Adkins v. Children's Hospital,
   261 U.S. 525 (1923) 434
   West Coast Hotel Co. v. Parrish,
   300 U.S. 379 (1937) 437

9 FREE SPEECH IN A
DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY 443

A. Free Speech and National Security 443
   Readings:
   Schenck v. United States,
   249 U.S. 47 (1919) 448
   Abrams v. United States,
   250 U.S. 616 (1919) 449
   Gitlow v. New York,
   268 U.S. 652 (1925) 450
   Whitney v. California,
   274 U.S. 357 (1927) 452
   Dennis v. United States,
   341 U.S. 494 (1951) 454
   Brandenburg v. Ohio,
   395 U.S. 444 (1969) 456
   Holder v. Humanitarian Law Project,
   561 U.S. ___ (2010) 458
B. Associational Rights 462
   Reading:
   Congress Seeks to Remove
   "Subversives" from FDR's Administration 464
C. The Regulation of Speech 465
   Readings:
   Cohen v. California,
   403 U.S. 15 (1971) 474
   R.A.V. v. St. Paul,
   505 U.S. 377 (1992) 476
   Tinker v. Des Moines School Dist.,
   393 U.S. 503 (1969) 479
   Morse v. Frederick,
   551 U.S. 393 (2007) 481
D. Forms of Speech 483
   Readings:
   Texas v. Johnson,
   491 U.S. 397 (1989) 487
   Snyder v. Phelps,
   562 U.S. ___ (2011) 489
   E. Commercial Speech 492
   F. Campaign Finance 495
   G. Broadcasting Rights 495
   Reading:
   FCC v. Pacifica Foundation,
   438 U.S. 726 (1978) 498

Conclusions 440
Notes and Questions 440
Selected Readings 441
### 11 FREEDOM OF THE PRESS

**A. The Evolution of Press Freedoms**
- Readings:
  - John Milton, *Areopagitica* (1644)
  - House Debate on the Sedition Act of 1798

**B. Regulating the Press**
- Readings:
  - Shield Law
  - Near v. Minnesota, 283 U.S. 697 (1931)
  - Branzburg v. Hayes, 408 U.S. 665 (1972)

**C. Free Press vs. Fair Trial**
- Readings:
  - Gannett Co. v. DePasquale, 443 U.S. 368 (1979)

**D. Libel Law**
- Readings:

**E. Obscenity**
- Readings:
  - Roth v. United States, 354 U.S. 476 (1957)
  - Miller v. California, 413 U.S. 15 (1973)

**F. Establishment Clause**
- Readings:
  - Congress Reacts to *Smith*

**D. Financial Assistance to Sectarian Schools**
- Readings:
  - Lemon v. Kurtzman, 403 U.S. 602 (1971)

**E. Religious Instruction and Prayers**
- Readings:
  - Congressional Hearings on School Prayer (1964)

**F. Nine Justices in Search of a Model**
- Notes and Questions

### 12 RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

**A. The Virginia Statute**
- Readings:
  - Virginia Statute for Establishing Religious Freedom (1786)
  - House Debate on the Religion Clauses (1789)

**B. Free Exercise Clause**
- Readings:

### 13 DUE PROCESS OF LAW

**A. The Concept of Due Process**
- Reading:
  - Powell v. Alabama, 287 U.S. 45 (1932)

**B. Due Process for Juveniles**
- Reading:
  - In re Gault, 387 U.S. 1 (1967)

**C. Grand Juries and Jury Trials**

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**CONTENTS**

- **xi**
---
Readings:
Duncan v. Louisiana,
391 U.S. 145 (1968) 650
Apodaca v. Oregon,
406 U.S. 404 (1972) 652
Ballew v. Georgia,
435 U.S. 223 (1978) 654
D. Fundamentals of a Fair Trial
Reading:
Palko v. Connecticut,
302 U.S. 319 (1937) 662
E. Self-Incrimination
F. Assistance of Counsel
Readings:
Gideon v. Wainwright,
372 U.S. 335 (1963) 674
Escobedo v. Illinois,
378 U.S. 478 (1964) 676
Miranda v. Arizona,
384 U.S. 436 (1966) 678
Dickerson v. United States,
G. The Eighth Amendment
Readings:
Furman v. Georgia,
408 U.S. 238 (1972) 691
Gregg v. Georgia,
428 U.S. 153 (1976) 694
Atkins v. Virginia,
536 U.S. 304 (2002) 696
JUSTICE LEWIS POWELL, JR.,
The Death Penalty and
Public Opinion 699
H. Prisoners’ Rights
I. The Right to Bear Arms
Reading:
District of Columbia v. Heller,
554 U.S. 570 (2008) 706
Notes and Questions 711
Selected Readings 711
14 SEARCH AND SEIZURE
A. Expectations of Privacy
B. Arrest and Search Warrants
Reading:
Congress Responds to Zurcher 718
C. Exceptions to the Warrant Requirement
Readings:
Coolidge v. New Hampshire,
403 U.S. 443 (1971) 734
California v. Ciraolo,
476 U.S. 207 (1986) 737
United States v. Ross,
456 U.S. 798 (1982) 739
Terry v. Ohio,
392 U.S. 1 (1968) 741
Chimel v. California,
395 U.S. 752 (1969) 743
New Jersey v. TLO,
469 U.S. 325 (1985) 745
D. Electronic Eavesdropping
Readings:
Olmstead v. United States,
277 U.S. 438 (1928) 752
Katz v. United States,
389 U.S. 347 (1967) 754
E. The Exclusionary Rule
Readings:
Weeks v. United States,
232 U.S. 383 (1914) 761
Mapp v. Ohio,
367 U.S. 643 (1961) 763
United States v. Leon,
468 U.S. 897 (1984) 765
Conclusions 767
Notes and Questions 768
Selected Readings 769
15 RACIAL DISCRIMINATION
A. Slavery
Reading:
Dred Scott v. Sandford,
60 U.S. (19 How.) 393 (1857) 775
B. Civil War Amendments
Readings:
Civil Rights Cases,
109 U.S. 3 (1883) 782
Plessy v. Ferguson,
163 U.S. 537 (1896) 784
C. School Desegregation
Readings:
Government’s Brief in Brown
Brown v. Board of Education,
347 U.S. 483 (1954) 796
Bolling v. Sharpe,
347 U.S. 497 (1954) 799
Brown v. Board of Education
349 U.S. 294 (1954) 800
Cooper v. Aaron,
358 U.S. 1 (1958) 801
Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg
Bd. of Ed., 402 U.S. 1 (1971) 803
Milliken v. Bradley,
418 U.S. 717 (1974) 804
Parents Involved in Community
Schools v. Seattle School District
No. 1, 551 U.S. 701 (2007) 806
D. Desegregating Other Activities
Readings:
Shelley v. Kraemer,
334 U.S. 1 (1948) 814
Congress Interprets the Commerce Clause
Heart of Atlanta Motel v. United States, 379 U.S. 241 (1964) 817

E. Employment and Affirmative Action
Readings:
Regents of the University of California v. Bakke, 438 U.S. 265 (1978) 829

Conclusions 841
Notes and Questions 842
Selected Readings 842

16 THE EXPANSION OF EQUAL PROTECTION 845
A. The Struggle for Women's Rights
Readings:
Bradwell v. State, 83 U.S. 130 (1873) 850
Congress Responds to Bradwell 852
Equal Pay Act of 1963: Congressional Debate 853
Civil Rights Act of 1964: Congressional Debate 854

B. Contemporary Gender Issues 856
Readings:
Frontiero v. Richardson, 411 U.S. 677 (1973) 864
Craig v. Boren, 429 U.S. 190 (1976) 866
Personnel Administrator of Mass. v. Feeney, 442 U.S. 256 (1979) 870
Senate Debates Women in Combat 877

C. Rights of Aliens 881
Readings:
Yick Wo v. Hopkins, 118 U.S. 356 (1886) 884

D. Rights of the Poor 890
Readings:
Shapiro v. Thompson, 394 U.S. 618 (1969) 893

E. Equal Protection for Gays and Lesbians 897
Readings:
Romer v. Evans, 517 U.S. 620 (1996) 899
Attorney General Letter to Congress Regarding DOMA 902

Conclusions 904
Notes and Questions 904
Selected Readings 904

17 RIGHTS OF PRIVACY 907
A. Dimensions of Privacy 907
Readings:
Buck v. Bell, 274 U.S. 200 (1927) 911

B. Use of Contraceptives 914
Reading:
Griswold v. Connecticut, 381 U.S. 479 (1965) 916

C. Reproductive Freedom 918
Readings:
Roe v. Wade, 410 U.S. 113 (1973) 927
Hyde Amendment of 1976: Congressional Debate 930
Harris v. McRae, 448 U.S. 297 (1980) 932

D. The Right to Die 944
Readings:
Cruzan v. Director, Missouri Dept. of Health, 497 U.S. 261 (1990) 947
Vacco v. Quill, 521 U.S. 793 (1997) 949
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Louis Fisher

After many years of teaching American Constitutional Law using this textbook, it has been a privilege and a pleasure to work with Lou Fisher on recent editions. I have always been drawn to this text because it recognizes that constitutional law is made through a dynamic dialogic political process rather than simply by nine Supreme Court justices. This seems a particularly important lesson to understand, for political science and law students alike, in a time when the popular understandings of constitutional politics and issues are so shallow and often misinformed. I dedicate the book to my late father, Russell E. Harriger, who always encouraged and supported my endeavors, even when he disagreed with me (which in the area of constitutional law was early and often).

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Introduction

To accommodate the leading cases on constitutional law, textbooks concentrate on court decisions and overlook the political, historical, and social framework in which these decisions are handed down. Constitutional law is thus reduced to the judicial exercise of divining the meaning of textual provisions. The larger process, including judicial as well as nonjudicial actors, is ignored. The consequence, as noted by one law professor, is the absence of a “comprehensive course on constitutional law in any meaningful sense in American law schools.”

The political process must be understood because it establishes the boundaries for judicial activity and influences the substance of specific decisions, if not immediately then within a few years. This book keeps legal issues in a broad political context. Cases should not be torn from their environment. A purely legalistic approach to constitutional law misses the constant, creative interplay between the judiciary and the political branches. The Supreme Court is not the exclusive source of constitutional law. It is not the sole or even dominant agency in deciding constitutional questions. The Constitution is interpreted initially by a private citizen, legislator, or executive official. Someone from the private or public sector decides that an action violates the Constitution; political pressures build in ways to reshape fundamental constitutional doctrines.

Books on constitutional law usually focus exclusively on Supreme Court decisions and stress its doctrines, as though lower courts and elected officials are unimportant. Other studies describe constitutional decision making as lacking in legal principle, based on low-level political haggling by various actors. We see an open and vigorous system struggling to produce principled constitutional law. Principles are important. Constitutional interpretations are not supposed to be idiosyncratic events or the result of a political free-for-all. If they were, our devotion to the rule of law would be either absurd or a matter of whimsy.

It is traditional to focus on constitutional rather than statutory interpretation, and yet the boundaries between these categories are unclear. Issues of constitutional dimension usually form a backdrop to “statutory” questions. Preoccupation with the Supreme Court as the principal or final arbiter of constitutional questions fosters a misleading impression. A dominant business of the Court is statutory construction, and through that function it interacts with other branches of government in a process that refines the meaning of the Constitution.

This study treats the Supreme Court and lower courts as one branch of a political system with a difficult but necessary task to perform. They often share with the legislature and the executive the responsibility for defining political values, resolving political conflict, and protecting the political process. Through commentary and reading selections, we try to bridge the artificial gap in the literature that separates law from politics. Lord Radcliffe advised that “we cannot learn law by learning law.” Law must be “a part of history, a part of economics and sociology, a part of ethics and a philosophy of life. It is not strong enough in itself to be a philosophy in itself.”

A Note on Citations. The introductory essays to each chapter contain many citations to court cases, public laws, congressional reports, and floor debates. The number of these citations may seem confusing and even overwhelming. We want to encourage the reader to consult these documents and develop a richer appreciation of the complex process that shapes constitutional law. Repeated citations to federal statutes help underscore the ongoing role of Congress and the executive branch in constitutional interpretation. To permit deeper exploration of certain issues, either for a term paper or scholarly research, footnotes contain leads to supplementary cases. Bibliographies are provided for each chapter. The appendices include a glossary of legal terms and a primer on researching the law.

If the coverage is too detailed, the instructor may always advise students to skip some of the material. Another option is to ask the student to understand two or three departures from a general doctrine, such as the famous Miranda warning developed by the Warren Court but whittled away by the Burger and Rehnquist Courts. Even if a student is initially stunned by the complexity of constitutional law, it is better to be aware of the delicate shadings that exist than to believe that the Court paints with bold, permanent strokes.

At various points in the chapters, we give examples where state courts, refusing to follow the lead of the Supreme Court, conferred greater constitutional rights than available at the federal level. These are examples only. They could have been multiplied many times over. No one should assume that rulings from the Supreme Court represent the last word on constitutional law, even for lower courts.

Compared to other texts, this book offers much more in the way of citations to earlier decisions. We do this for several reasons. The citations allow the reader to research areas in greater depth. They also highlight the process of trial and error used by the Court to clarify constitutional principles. Concentration on contemporary cases would obscure the Court’s record of veering down side roads, backtracking, and reversing direction. Focusing on landmark cases prevents the reader from understanding the development of constitutional law: the dizzying exceptions to “settled” doctrines, the laborious manner in which the Court struggles to fix the meaning of the Constitution, the twists and turns, the detours and dead ends. Describing major cases without these tangled patterns would presume an orderly and static system that mocks the dynamic, fitful, creative, and consensus-building process that exists. No one branch of government prevails. The process is polyarchal, not hierarchical. The latter, perhaps attractive for architectural structures, is inconsistent with our aspiration for self-government.

In all court cases and other documents included as readings, footnotes have been deleted. For the introductory essays, reference works are abbreviated as follows:

Fisher Constitutional Conflicts between Congress and the President (5th ed. 2007).