American Constitutional Law
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by Louis Fisher and Katy J. Harriger
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Civil Rights and Civil Liberties
To The Constitution Project — Louis Fisher

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

INTRODUCTION xvii
1 CONSTITUTIONAL POLITICS 1
2 THE DOCTRINE OF JUDICIAL REVIEW 31
3 THRESHOLD REQUIREMENTS: HUSBANDING POWER AND PRESTIGE 71
4 JUDICIAL ORGANIZATION 109
5 DECISION MAKING: PROCESS AND STRATEGY 135
6 SEPARATION OF POWERS: DOMESTIC CONFLICTS 159
7 SEPARATION OF POWERS: EMERGENCIES AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS 249
8 FEDERAL-STATE RELATIONS 313
9 ECONOMIC LIBERTIES 399
10 EFFORTS TO CURB THE COURT 445
APPENDICES 481
TABLE OF CASES 509
INDEX 523
## Contents

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS  
William W. Van Alstyne, A Critical Guide to  
Marbury v. Madison  44

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

### INTRODUCTION  
Marbury v. Madison  44

### 1 CONSTITUTIONAL POLITICS

#### A. Litigation as a Political Process  
Martin v. Hunter’s Lessee  
14 U.S. (1 Wheat.) 304 (1816)  46

#### B. Lobbying the Courts

#### C. The Executive in Court

Reading:  
Steel Seizure Case of 1952: Oral Argument Before the District Court  11

Political Dynamics of Constitutional Law  12

D. Congressional Duties

Reading:  
Raines v. Byrd  
521 U.S. 811 (1997)  15

E. Judge As Lawmaker

F. Judge as Administrator

G. Independent State Action

H. Who Has the “Last Word”?  
Congress Responds to the Sedition Act  22

Jackson’s Veto of the Bank Bill  24

The Senate Debates Jackson’s Veto Message  25

Lincoln’s Critique of Dred Scott  26

WALTER F. MURPHY, Who Shall Interpret?  27

### 2 THE DOCTRINE OF JUDICIAL REVIEW

A. Sources of Judicial Review Authority  
Ashwander v. TVA (The Brandeis Rules)  
297 U.S. 288 (1936)  75

B. The Framers’ Intent

Reading:  
Alexander Hamilton, Federalist No. 78  36

C. The Road to Marbury  
Marbury v. Madison  
5 U.S. (1 Cr.) 137 (1803)  42

Reading:  
Frothingham v. Mellon  
262 U.S. 447 (1923)  81

### 3 THRESHOLD REQUIREMENTS: HUSBANDING POWER AND PRESTIGE

A. Cases and Controversies  
Flast v. Cohen  
392 U.S. 83 (1968)  82

B. Standing to Sue

Reading:  
Bellotti v. Baird (Advisory Opinions)  
443 U.S. 622 (1979)  76

Notes and Questions  69

Selected Readings  69
# CONTENTS

## C. Mootness
- Reading: DeFunis v. Odegaard
  - 416 U.S. 312 (1974) 89

## D. Ripeness
- Reading: Poe v. Ullman
  - 367 U.S. 497 (1961) 93

## E. Political Questions
- Reading: Baker v. Carr
  - 369 U.S. 186 (1962) 96

## 6 SEPARATION OF POWERS:

### DOMESTIC CONFLICTS

- **A. The Separation Doctrine**
  - Reading: Congress Interprets the Ineligibility Clause 159
  - Presidential Signing Statements 165
  - Madison's Analysis of the Separation Doctrine 166

- **B. Presidential Power**
  - Reading: Hamilton on Executive Power 168

- **C. Creating the Executive Departments**
  - Reading: Bowsher v. Synar
    - 478 U.S. 714 (1986) 179
  - Attorney General Opinion on Ministerial Duties 178
  - Morrison v. Olson

## 4 JUDICIAL ORGANIZATION

- **A. Federal Court System**
  - 109

- **B. Legislative and Specialized Courts**
  - 113

- **C. The Appointment Process**
  - Reading: Nomination Hearings of Sandra Day O'Connor 117

## 5 DECISION MAKING:

### PROCESS AND STRATEGY

- **A. Jurisdiction: Original and Appellate**
  - 135

- **B. The Writ of Certiorari**
  - 137

- **C. From Oral Argument to Decision**
  - 141

- **D. Unanimity and Dissent**
  - 149

## G. Investigations and Executive Privilege
- Reading: Watkins v. United States
  - 354 U.S. 178 (1957) 225
Barenblatt v. United States 360 U.S. 109 (1959) 228
Negotiating Executive Privilege: The AT&T Cases 233
H. Congressional Membership and Prerogatives 238
Reading:
I. Immigration Policy 243
Conclusions 245
Notes and Questions 245
Selected Readings 246

7 SEPARATION OF POWERS: EMERGENCIES AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS 249
A. External and Internal Affairs 249
Readings:
United States v. Curtiss-Wright Corp. 299 U.S. 304 (1936) 253
Congress Interprets Curtiss-Wright: The Iran-Contra Report 255
B. An Executive Prerogative? 261
Readings:
The Prize Cases 2 Black (67 U.S.) 635 (1863) 265
Ex parte Milligan 4 Wall. (71 U.S.) 2 (1866) 267
Korematsu v. United States 323 U.S. 214 (1944) 268
Youngstown Co. v. Sawyer 343 U.S. 579 (1952) 271
ERWIN N. GRISWOLD, How Sensitive Were the "Pentagon Papers"? 275
C. Treaties and Executive Agreements 276
Readings:
Goldwater v. Carter 444 U.S. 996 (1979) 280
D. The War Power 285
Readings:
War Powers Resolution 303
Campbell v. Clinton 203 F.3d 19 (D.C. Cir. 2000) 306
Military Operations in Libya OLC opinion 308
E. Rights of Citizenship 309
Conclusions 310
Notes and Questions 311
Selected Readings 311

8 FEDERAL-STATE RELATIONS 313
A. The Principle of Federalism 313
Readings:
McCulloch v. Maryland 17 U.S. 315 (1819) 320
Missouri v. Holland 252 U.S. 416 (1920) 323
B. The Commerce Clause 325
Readings:
Gibbons v. Ogden 22 U.S. (9 Wheat.) 1 (1824) 327
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:
F. State Powers Revived 354
Readings:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>United States v. Lopez</td>
<td>359</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States v. Morrison</td>
<td>362</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>529 U.S. 598 (2000)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gonzales v. Raich</td>
<td>364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>545 U.S. 1 (2005)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. The Spending and Taxing Powers</td>
<td>366</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readings:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bailey v. Drexel Furniture Co.</td>
<td>370</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Child Labor Tax Case)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>259 U.S. 20 (1922)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steward Machine Co. v. Davis</td>
<td>371</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>301 U.S. 548 (1937)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Dakota v. Dole</td>
<td>373</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>483 U.S. 203 (1987)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Federation of Independent Business v. Sebelius</td>
<td>375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>567 U.S. ___ (2012)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King v. Burwell</td>
<td>378</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H. Preemption and Abstention</td>
<td>382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readings:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pennsylvania v. Nelson</td>
<td>386</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>350 U.S. 497 (1956)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona v. United States</td>
<td>387</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>567 U.S. ___ (2012)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Nationalization of the Bill of Rights</td>
<td>390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Incorporation Doctrine:</td>
<td>394</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Testimony by Justice Rehnquist</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>395</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes and Questions</td>
<td>396</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selected Readings</td>
<td>397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 ECONOMIC LIBERTIES</td>
<td>399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. The Meaning of Property</td>
<td>399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madison's Essay on Property</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. The Contract Clause</td>
<td>401</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readings:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calder v. Bull</td>
<td>404</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 U.S. (3 Dall.) 385 (1798)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fletcher v. Peck</td>
<td>406</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 U.S. (6 Cr.) 87 (1810)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dartmouth College v. Woodward</td>
<td>407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17 U.S. (4 Wheat.) 517 (1819)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles River Bridge v. Warren Bridge</td>
<td>409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36 U.S. (11 Pet.) 420 (1837)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home Bldg. &amp; Loan Assn. v. Blaisdell</td>
<td>411</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>290 U.S. 398 (1934)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. The Takings Clause</td>
<td>413</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Readings:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawaii Housing Authority v. Midkiff</td>
<td>420</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>467 U.S. 229 (1984)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>APPENDICES</th>
<th>Appendix 3</th>
<th>Appendix 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 1</td>
<td>Glossary of Legal Terms</td>
<td>How to Research the Law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Constitution of the United States</td>
<td>497</td>
<td>503</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 2</td>
<td>Table of Cases</td>
<td>Index</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justices of the Supreme Court (1789–2016)</td>
<td>495</td>
<td>509</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>525</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
About the Authors

LOUIS FISHER received his B.S. from the College of William and Mary and his Ph.D. from the New School for Social Research. After teaching political science at Queens College, he joined the Congressional Research Service of the Library of Congress in 1970, where he served as Senior Specialist in Separation of Powers. On March 6, 2006, he joined the Law Library of the Library of Congress as Specialist in Constitutional Law. Upon his retirement from the Library in August 2010, he joined The Constitution Project as scholar in residence. He has testified before congressional committees more than 50 times on such issues as war powers, state secrets, NSA surveillance, Congress and the Constitution, executive lobbying, executive privilege, committee subpoenas, impoundment of funds, legislative vetoes, the item veto, the pocket veto, presidential reorganization authority, recess appointments, executive spending discretion, the congressional budget process, the Balanced Budget Amendment, biennial budgeting, covert spending, and CIA whistleblowing. During 1987 he served as Research Director for the House Iran-Contra Committee.


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is the editor of *Separation of Powers: Commentary and Documents*, (Congressional Quarterly Press 2003), the author of *The Special Prosecutor in American Politics*, 2nd ed., revised (University Press of Kansas, 2000), and *Independent Justice: The Federal Special Prosecutor in American Politics* (University Press of Kansas, 1992), as well as a number of articles about constitutional law issues in journals and law reviews. Most recently she co-authored, with Jill J. McMillan, *Speaking of Politics: Preparing College Students for Democratic Citizenship through Deliberative Dialogue* (Kettering Foundation Press, 2007). At Wake Forest, Harriger has been the recipient of the Reid Doyle Prize for Excellence in Teaching (1988), the John Reinhardt Distinguished Teaching Award (2002), and the Schoonmaker Award for Community Service (2006).
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This book, in gestation for years, has many contributors and abettors. With the publication of the eighth edition, Katy J. Harriger joined as co-author. She brings to the task a strong background in constitutional law and separation of powers and many years of classroom experience and professional activity on legal issues. David Gray Adler, co-author of the seventh edition, offered extensive analytical contributions and in previous editions provided careful, thoughtful reviews.

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It is my pleasure to dedicate the book to The Constitution Project, which I have worked with for over fifteen years on a number of issues, including war powers and the state secrets privilege. Its expertise, analytical skills, and nonpartisan approach contribute to an informed and professional debate on key questions of constitutional law. Upon my retirement from government in August 2010, I worked even more closely with The Constitution Project as Scholar in Residence and am proud to be among its supporters.

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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Katy J. Harriger
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. According to this approach, constitutional law is reduced to the judicial exercise of divining the meaning of textual provisions. The larger process, taking account of both judicial and 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 substantially overlap. 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

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cases, public laws, congressional reports, and floor debates. Reference to these citations may seem confusing and even overwhelming. We include them to encourage readers 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 comprehensive, the instructor may always advise students to focus on selected areas. 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:

- **Comp. Gen.** Decisions of the Comptroller General.
- **Fisher** Constitutional Conflicts between Congress and the President (6th ed. 2014).