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FORCEFUL MINIMALISM, HEIN V. FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION, INC., AND THE PRUDENCE OF “NOT DOING”

Brendan R. McNamara

Abstract: Proponents of judicial minimalism argue that courts should issue narrow rulings that address only the issues necessary to resolve the case at hand and should avoid needlessly broad rulings that could result in unforeseen consequences. The recent Supreme Court decision in Hein v. Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc. provides a compelling case study of judicial minimalism. Resisting opposing calls for broader rulings from both the concurring and dissenting justices, a plurality of the Court followed a minimalist approach to resolve a difficult question of taxpayer standing. Generally, federal taxpayers do not have standing to challenge government expenditures of tax funds in federal court. In Flast v. Cohen, the Court carved out a narrow exception for challenges to expenditures that allegedly violate the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause. This exception requires a connection between the constitutional violation and Congress’s use of its taxing and spending power. Hein involved a challenge to purely executive actions, and the Court faced the issue of whether to expand Flast to cover such actions. While some Justices called for completely overruling Flast in all situations and others called for expanding Flast to cover purely executive actions, the plurality took a narrower approach, denying standing without expanding or contracting the taxpayer standing doctrine. This Note builds on prior scholarship that advocates for judicial minimalism by arguing that Hein’s plurality opinion demonstrates judicial minimalism succeeding in practice.

INTRODUCTION

Justice Brandeis famously said about the Supreme Court’s role, “[t]he most important thing we do is not doing.”¹ Judicial review, the power to strike down laws, essentially amounts to the power to negate the acts of the popularly elected and politically accountable branches of government. This power is not one to wield lightly. Rather, judicial review “is legitimate only in the last resort, and as a necessity in the determination of real, earnest and vital controversy . . . .”² Judicial minimalists embrace the view that courts should only do as much as necessary to dispose of the case at hand and no more.³

decisions run the risk of being wrong, minimalist decisions run this risk only when necessary.

This Note uses a recent Supreme Court decision, *Hein v. Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc.*, to argue for judicial minimalism as a general method of adjudication. In *Hein*, the Court faced a choice between issuing a narrow or broad ruling. The case presented an issue of standing—specifically, whether federal taxpayers have standing to challenge executive actions that allegedly violate the Establishment Clause. Justice Alito’s plurality opinion denied standing on narrow grounds by distinguishing prior precedent. Justice Scalia, joined by Justice Thomas, argued for a broad resolution that would overrule precedents on which standing could be based and thereby deny standing. The dissent argued for interpreting prior precedents expansively to allow standing. Justice Kennedy also wrote a separate concurrence discussing concerns about separation of powers.

This Note argues that Justice Alito’s plurality opinion in *Hein* resolves the case in the best way. This view contradicts that taken by many of the legal commentators who reacted to the case when the opinions were issued. Further, this Note analyzes the divergent jurisprudence of Justice Alito’s and Justice Scalia’s opinions in *Hein*, explores how the facts in *Hein* fit into taxpayer standing doctrine, and

5. See Sunstein, supra note 3, at 10–11 (discussing how minimalists prefer rulings to be narrow rather than wide). Although Professor Sunstein uses “wide” rather than “broad,” this Note uses the term “broad” as synonymous and interchangeable with “wide.”
7. Chief Justice Roberts and Justice Kennedy joined this opinion. Id. For discussion of how this opinion distinguished prior precedents, see infra Part III.
8. Id. at 2573–74 (Scalia, J., concurring in the judgment).
9. Id. at 2584 (Souter, J., dissenting). justices Stevens, Ginsburg, and Breyer joined the dissent. Id.
10. Id. at 2572 (Kennedy, J., concurring).
Forceful Minimalism argues that the plurality’s minimalist approach best exemplifies the prudence of “not doing” more than necessary to resolve a case. This narrow ruling avoids a drastic change in a settled area of law that has not proven to need an abrupt about face, while leaving room in the future for further modifications as they may prove necessary upon consideration of cases with facts that compel broader judicial action.

Part I of this Note provides background on judicial minimalism and explains how standing doctrine and stare decisis accord with minimalism. Part II summarizes the development and status of federal taxpayer standing doctrine before Hein, providing context for the precedents that Justice Scalia would overturn and noting the narrow manner in which the Court has both written and construed these precedents. Part III analyzes Hein’s separate opinions, compares the case’s facts to prior precedents, and explains which opinion of the fractured Court controls. Finally, Part IV explains why minimalism is the best solution for Hein and explores areas where minimalism will not be the best approach.

I. MINIMALISM, STANDING DOCTRINE, AND STARE DECISIS LIMIT THE ROLE OF FEDERAL COURTS

Minimalism, standing doctrine, and stare decisis all further a common purpose of limiting the role of federal courts,\textsuperscript{12} along with other doctrines like constitutional avoidance\textsuperscript{13} and Pullman abstention.\textsuperscript{14} Taken together, these doctrines further the minimalist goal of doing as little as necessary and resolving cases narrowly.

To illustrate, Railroad Commission of Texas v. Pullman Co.\textsuperscript{15} epitomizes minimalism’s virtues. The case involved an Equal Protection

\footnotesize{12. See SUNSTEIN, supra note 3, at 262 (linking minimalism to standing and other methods of limiting the reach of judicial decisions).
15. 312 U.S. 496 (1941).}
challenge to segregation on railroad cars, a direct attack on another famous railroad segregation case, *Plessy v. Ferguson.* While the Court unanimously overruled *Plessy* in 1954, this consensus may not have been possible thirteen years earlier in *Pullman.* In dismissing the federal lawsuit and leaving the issue—whether the Texas Railroad Commission had the authority to issue the contested order—to be resolved on state law grounds, the Court prevented an unnecessary decision on the merits. How might the law have developed if the Court reached the merits in *Pullman* and reaffirmed *Plessy* in 1941? Alternatively, considering the resistance to the unanimous *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision thirteen years later, what would have happened if a narrow majority overruled *Plessy* in 1941?

Minimalists seek to avoid ensnaring unelected judges in these political traps. The following sections of Part I describe the doctrines of minimalism, standing, and stare decisis in greater detail.

**A. Minimalist Judges Resolve Each Case on Narrow Grounds**

Judicial minimalists decide only the issues necessary to resolve each case or controversy, while leaving extraneous issues to be resolved another time, if at all. The point of minimalism is to write narrow opinions that only address the issues necessary to adjudicate a case,
rather than to write broad opinions designed to address entire swathes of potential cases. 25 While minimalism is a form of restraint, minimalism differs from the concept of judicial restraint because the latter focuses on giving deference to decisions of the political branches. 26 In contrast to judges embracing judicial restraint, a minimalist judge has no problem striking down popularly enacted laws if the resolution of a case demands that result. 27 Mindful both of the apparent contradiction of allowing non-elected federal judges to strike down popularly enacted laws within a democratic system of government, 28 and of the inherent risk that any decision might lead to negative consequences, 29 the minimalist exercises restraint by resisting the urge to rule broadly.

Minimalism is a natural outgrowth of the common-law system. 30 Rather than laying out broad rules designed to apply prospectively to a wide range of situations, courts build the common law as a wall in which each case forms a brick. 31 The common law accretes over time from the resolution of individual fact scenarios into a body of precedent that guides subsequent judges by analogy in a wide range of situations. 32 If one case proves to have been incorrectly decided, a later judge may replace that brick without having to build an entirely new wall. 33
Standing doctrine ensures that federal courts only exercise their power when necessary to resolve a valid dispute between adverse parties. Article III of the United States Constitution grants jurisdiction to enumerated types of “Cases” and “Controversies,” and federal courts have interpreted this jurisdictional limitation to restrict the power of the federal courts to rule on actual cases and controversies. Standing, along with related justiciability doctrines, maintains the separation of powers of the three branches of government by defining “the proper—and properly limited—role of the courts in a democratic society.” To borrow a famous phrase from the administrative law context, standing helps ensure that the federal judicial power remains “canalized within banks that keep it from overflowing.” The Court has firmly established that standing is an essential part of separation of powers. Like its fellow justiciability doctrines, standing reduces the reach of federal judicial power. To the judicial minimalist, this is desirable. Just as minimalism counsels that courts should rule only on the issues necessary to resolve each case, it also insists that courts should resolve each case only when given the power to do so. This approach maintains separation of powers by ensuring that courts pass judgment, and thus run the risk of error, only when they have been given such power and only when reaching a judgment on the merits is necessary. Because the judicial power only extends to justiciable cases, rulings in new circumstances.

34. U.S. CONST. art. III, § 2, cl. 1.
36. In addition to standing, justiciability doctrines include ripeness, mootness, and the bans on deciding political questions and issuing advisory opinions. See generally ERWIN CHEMERINSKY, FEDERAL JURISDICTION 43–172 (5th ed. 2007); FALLON ET AL., supra note 14, at 55–267.
37. Warth, 422 U.S. at 498.
38. Panama Refining Co. v. Ryan, 293 U.S. 388, 440 (1935) (Cardozo, J., dissenting) (arguing that separation of powers requires Congress to place limits on the powers it delegates to administrative agencies).
40. See SUNSTEIN, supra note 3, at 39–40 (“[T]he principles [of justiciability] are obviously an effort to minimize the judicial presence in American public life . . . . [f]or example, a judgment that a complex issue is not now ripe for decision may minimize the risk of error and increase the scope for continuing democratic deliberation on the problem at hand.”); see also id. at 39 (linking minimalism to the “passive virtues” discussed in BICKEL, supra note 1, at 111–98).
41. See id. at 40.
cases where plaintiffs lack standing are illegitimate and undermine the judiciary’s stature in a government of separated and enumerated powers. In disputes involving contentious public rights such as religious freedom, standing doctrine prevents federal courts from sailing into treacherous political waters without the anchor of a true case or controversy. Because minimalism seeks to limit the risk of error created by judicial involvement in divisive political battles, standing requirements for Establishment Clause litigation provide fertile ground to explore minimalism.

C. Stare Decisis Works in Tandem with Minimalism to Limit the Role of Federal Courts

Stare decisis, literally “to stand by things decided,” governs the continued validity and precedential value of case holdings. The Court in Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey, faced with the choice of affirming or overruling the landmark abortion case Roe v. Wade, discussed the factors that courts must weigh when deciding whether to overrule precedent. The Court stated that the best justification to overrule a precedent is that the precedent has proven itself to be so clearly erroneous as to demand its abandonment. Because this situation occurs rarely, courts may consider other factors when determining whether to overrule precedent. These factors include whether the rule set forth in the challenged precedent: (1) defies “practical workability,” (2) has been relied upon such that overruling would result in hardship, (3) has become a remnant of an abandoned doctrine, or (4) relies on outdated facts such that the rule has lost “significant application or justification.” By limiting the circumstances

42. See BICKEL, supra note 1, at 111, 117 (viewing standing as a “passive virtue” that limits courts to their legitimate role in a democracy).
44. See SUNSTEIN, supra note 3, at 4–5.
45. BLACK’S LAW DICTIONARY 1443 (8th ed. 2004).
49. Casey, 505 U.S. at 854.
50. Id.
51. Id.
52. Id. at 854–55.
under which controlling precedent may be abandoned, stare decisis
tethers the Court to its prior rulings and constrains the scope of future
decisions.

In sum, the doctrines of minimalism, standing, and stare decisis all
ensure that the judicial branch operates within a limited sphere.
Minimalist judges limit their rulings to address only what is necessary;
standing limits courts to hearing only those cases brought by proper
plaintiffs; stare decisis keeps judges bound to the decisions of prior
courts.53

II. FEDERAL TAXPAYERS HAVE STANDING TO CHALLENGE
   A NARROW CLASS OF ESTABLISHMENT CLAUSE
   VIOLATIONS

Citizens claiming standing based on their status as federal taxpayers
face an uphill battle in convincing a federal court to adjudicate their
cases. The Supreme Court has held that taxpayers do not have standing
to challenge the constitutionality of federal statutes.54 In Flast v.
Cohen,55 the Court carved out an exception for certain Establishment
Clause claims.56 In cases subsequent to Flast and preceding Hein, the
Court clarified and cabined the limits of this exception.57

A. Taxpayers Generally Do Not Have Standing to Challenge the
   Constitutionality of Federal Statutes

Standing doctrine requires that a plaintiff bringing a cause of action in
federal court have suffered a personal injury.58 From time to time,
federal taxpayers seek to establish standing by framing the injury as the

53. For a discussion of how stare decisis furthers judicial restraint, see Thomas W. Merrill,
Originalism, Stare Decisis, and the Promotion of Judicial Restraint, 22 CONST. COMMENT. 271,
277–82 (2005). As discussed at supra note 26, though minimalism differs from judicial restraint,
the terms are often used interchangeably or used to refer to the same concept of limiting the scope
of judicial decision-making.
54. See infra Part II. A.
55. 392 U.S. 83 (1968).
56. See infra Part II.B.
57. See infra Part II.C.
58. See Lujan v. Defenders of Wildlife, 504 U.S. 555, 560 (1992); Allen v. Wright, 468 U.S. 737,
751 (1984). In addition to the injury requirement, there must be a causal link between the plaintiff’s
injury and the alleged wrongful acts of the defendant, and the remedy sought must redress the
plaintiff’s injury. Allen, 468 U.S. at 751; see also id. at 753 n.19 (clarifying that the causation and
redressability requirements of standing are distinct and separate requirements).
financial injury of paying taxes. Although taxpayers have standing to challenge the collection of a specific tax on the grounds that the tax itself violates a constitutional provision, a tougher question emerges when a plaintiff asserts standing as a federal taxpayer and the alleged unconstitutional act is not the imposition of the tax but rather how the taxes are spent. The Supreme Court first ruled on the ability of federal taxpayers to challenge the constitutionality of federal spending in *Frothingham v. Mellon*.

In *Frothingham*, the plaintiffs challenged a federal appropriations statute, the Maternity Act of 1921, on the ground that the statute invaded state sovereignty, thus violating the Tenth Amendment. Mrs. Frothingham argued, in effect, that she had standing as a federal taxpayer because the allegedly unconstitutional spending for the Maternity Act increased her tax burden without due process of law. The Court rejected this argument, declaring that an individual taxpayer has so minute an interest in the pool of federal tax funds that there is no individualized interest or injury; therefore, Mrs. Frothingham did not have standing.

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60. Hein v. Freedom From Religion Found., Inc., 551 U.S. ___ (June 25, 2007), 127 S. Ct. 2553, 2563 (2007) (plurality opinion) (citing *Follett v. Town of McCormick*, 321 U.S. 573 (1944)). *Follett* involved a prosecution for selling books without a locally required license. *Follett*, 321 U.S. at 574. The defendant there was a Jehovah’s Witness who challenged the license statute as violating his right to free exercise of religion. *Id.* The Supreme Court held that the license fee amounted to an unconstitutional tax on constitutionally protected religious activity. *Id.* at 577.

61. For a thorough exploration of the history of state and municipal taxpayer standing in federal court, see generally Staudt, * supra* note 59. As Professor Staudt notes, whether state and municipal taxpayers have standing to sue in state courts presents a different question governed by state law and not subject to federal standing doctrine. *Id.* at 775. The contours of state and municipal taxpayer standing, both in federal and in state courts, are beyond the scope of this Note.

62. *Frothingham v. Mellon*, 262 U.S. 447, 486 (1923) (decided with *Massachusetts v. Mellon*). Although Mrs. Frothingham claimed standing as a federal taxpayer, Massachusetts challenged the federal appropriations statute as a violation of its sovereignty over state affairs. *Id.* at 480. The Court dismissed both cases on justiciability grounds. *Id.* (“We have reached the conclusion that the cases must be disposed of for want of jurisdiction without considering the merits of the constitutional questions.”). Although the term “standing” had not yet been widely adopted to refer to these types of justiciability issues, see FALLON ET AL., * supra* note 14, at 126 n.1, this Note will use the term “standing” for clarity.


64. *Frothingham*, 262 U.S. at 479.

65. U.S. CONST. amend. X.

have standing to bring her claim in federal court.\textsuperscript{67} Instead, the Court characterized an individual taxpayer’s injury as one suffered in common with people generally.\textsuperscript{68} Additionally, the Court reasoned that the judiciary has no power to rule on the validity of congressional acts in a vacuum and thus, when a taxpayer seeks a judicial remedy, the taxpayer must show “not only that the statute is invalid but [also] that [the party] has sustained or is immediately in danger of sustaining some direct injury as a result of its enforcement.”\textsuperscript{69} Consequently, an injury suffered “in some indefinite way in common with people generally” cannot support a valid case or controversy.\textsuperscript{70}

In a subsequent state taxpayer standing case, the Court further expounded on the limitations of taxpayer injury.\textsuperscript{71} In \textit{Doremus v. Board of Education of the Borough of Hawthorne},\textsuperscript{72} the plaintiffs challenged the practice of teachers reciting Bible verses in New Jersey public schools\textsuperscript{73} under the Establishment Clause,\textsuperscript{74} claiming standing as state and municipal taxpayers.\textsuperscript{75} The Court declined to review the state court’s decision, holding that the plaintiffs had no standing in federal court.\textsuperscript{76} In addressing the issue of taxpayer injury, the Court quoted favorably from the state high court ruling that the brief recitation from the Old

\begin{footnotes}
\item[67] Id. at 487.
\item[68] Id. at 488–89. Such injuries are known as generalized grievances. \textit{See, e.g.}, William A. Fletcher, \textit{The Structure of Standing}, 98 \textit{Yale L.J.} 221, 222 (1988) (“If a plaintiff can show sufficient injury to satisfy Article III, he must also satisfy prudential concerns about, for example . . . whether he should be able to litigate generalized social grievances.”).
\item[69] \textit{Frothingham}, 262 U.S. at 488.
\item[70] Id. \textit{But see} Fed. Election Comm’n \textit{v. Akins}, 524 U.S. 11, 19, 21, 23–24 (1998) (holding that when a statute grants a cause of action to any person “aggrieved” by an action of the Federal Election Commission, an aggrieved plaintiff has standing if the injury is “concrete” even if it is one shared by many others).
\item[71] Although the plaintiffs brought suit in state court claiming standing as state taxpayers, the Supreme Court reviewed the case because the complaint alleged violations of the Establishment Clause. \textit{Doremus v. Board of Educ. of the Borough of Hawthorne}, 342 U.S. 429, 430, 432 (1952).
\item[72] 342 U.S. 429 (1952).
\item[73] Id. at 430.
\item[74] \textit{U.S. Const. amend. I, cl. 1}.
\item[75] \textit{Doremus}, 342 U.S. at 432. One plaintiff also claimed standing as a parent of a child subject to the challenged law, but the Court dismissed this as moot because the child had already graduated. \textit{Id.} at 432–33.
\item[76] Id. at 435. \textit{Cf. ASARCO Inc. v. Kadish}, 490 U.S. 605, 618 (1989) (holding that only the party seeking Supreme Court review of an adverse state court ruling need satisfy federal standing requirements); \textit{id.} at 623 n.2 (distinguishing \textit{Doremus}, where the original state court plaintiff sought Supreme Court review, from \textit{ASARCO}, where the original state court defendant-intervenors sought Supreme Court review).
\end{footnotes}
Forceful Minimalism

Testament each morning added no additional cost to the schools’ operational budget. Because the school day lasts a fixed period of time, the cost of teacher salaries does not change based on lesson content or classroom speech. While the plaintiffs claimed taxpayer injury, there was no specific appropriation of funds and therefore no taxpayer standing. Despite being a state taxpayer standing case, Doremus is significant to the federal taxpayer standing doctrine because of this last distinction: federal taxpayer standing, if it can exist at all, must be linked to a specific expenditure of funds supporting the challenged activity.

B. Flast v. Cohen Created a Narrow Exception That Permits Federal Taxpayer Standing Under Certain Circumstances

Forty-five years after Frothingham, the Supreme Court carved out a narrow exception to the general ban on federal taxpayer standing. Flast v. Cohen presented an Establishment Clause challenge to the Secondary Education Act of 1965 on the ground that the Act authorized states to give federal education funds to private schools. The plaintiffs claimed standing as taxpayers and specifically challenged the use of federal tax dollars to support religious institutions, characterizing such actions as “compulsory taxation for religious purposes.” The Court held that a federal taxpayer can have standing to challenge a federal statute by showing a “logical nexus between the status asserted and the claim sought to be adjudicated.”

77. Id. at 431 (quoting Doremus v. Bd. of Educ. of Borough of Hawthorne, 75 A.2d 880, 881–82 (N.J. 1950)).
78. See id.
79. Id. at 434–35.
83. Flast, 392 U.S. at 85–86. While the Act only referred to private schools generally and did not mention private religious schools, during the 1960s the vast majority of private schools were religiously affiliated. Hein v. Freedom From Religion Found., Inc., 551 U.S. ___ (June 25, 2007), 127 S. Ct. 2553, 2565 n.3 (2007) (plurality opinion).
84. Justice Harlan argued that tax dollars become general funds and lose their identity as tax dollars once collected, and thus the plaintiffs challenged the use of general funds rather than tax dollars. Flast, 392 U.S. at 128 (dissenting opinion).
85. Id. at 87.
86. Id. at 102.
According to *Flast*, the analysis of whether the required nexus between federal taxpayer status and the claim to be adjudicated exists has two parts. First, a taxpayer may only challenge federal statutes passed under the taxing and spending power so long as the spending is not “incidental” to administering “an essentially regulatory statute.” The Court noted that Congress appropriated almost one billion dollars to implement the Secondary Education Act in 1965 and referred to this amount as “substantial,” but *Flast*’s holding did not explicitly require that any minimum amount be spent. Second, the challenge must be based on a specific constitutional limitation on the taxing and spending power. The Court held that the Establishment Clause imposes a limitation on the taxing and spending power, but did not decide whether any other constitutional provisions impose a similar limitation.

C. Later Cases Further Narrowed the *Flast* Exception

In fact, the Court has never found any additional constitutional provisions that directly limit the taxing and spending power. A few years after *Flast*, two cases denied taxpayer standing for alleged

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87. Id.
88. Id. The Constitution grants Congress the power to tax and spend. U.S. CONST. art. I, § 8, cl. 1.
89. *Flast*, 392 U.S. at 102 (citing *Doremus v. Bd. of Educ. of the Borough of Hawthorne*, 342 U.S. 429 (1952)). This restriction means that to pass the first part of the nexus test, Congress must have allocated money to be spent on the challenged statutory program. see *Bowen v. Kendrick*, 487 U.S. 589, 619 (“We do not think, however, that appellees’ claim that [statutory] funds are being used improperly by individual grantees is any less a challenge to congressional taxing and spending power simply because the funding authorized by Congress has flowed through and been administered by the Secretary.”). Similar to *Doremus*, a taxpayer would fail the first part of the nexus test if the challenged statute dictated that a federal employee perform allegedly unconstitutional activities in the course of employment without providing any additional funding for these new activities. *See Flast*, 392 U.S. at 102; *Doremus*, 342 U.S. at 431.
90. Id. at 103 n.23.
91. Id. at 103.
92. See id. at 105–06. Indeed, the Court seemed to imply that any amount spent would be sufficient as long as the spending was not incidental to a regulatory scheme as discussed in * supra* note 89. *See Flast*, 392 U.S. at 103–04 (citing 2 WRITINGS OF JAMES MADISON 183, 186 (Hunt ed. 1901)).
93. Id. at 102–03.
94. Id. at 105.
95. See, e.g., *Valley Forge Christian Coll. v. Ams. United for Separation of Church & State, Inc.*, 454 U.S. 464, 508 n.18 (1982) (Brennan, J., dissenting) (“In the years since the announcement of the *Flast* test we have yet to recognize a similar restriction on Congress’ power to tax, and I know of none.”).
violations of other constitutional provisions. The Court recently denied standing to a state taxpayer challenging an alleged Dormant Commerce Clause violation. Although the Court in *Flast* left open the possibility that other constitutional provisions could pass the second part of the nexus test, *Flast*’s holding has effectively been confined to Establishment Clause challenges. Contrary to Justice Douglas’s prediction that *Flast*’s narrow holding would expand and lead to the gradual erosion of *Frothingham*, later decisions have done just the opposite: narrowed *Flast* and reinforced *Frothingham*.

Even within *Flast*’s accepted domain, the Establishment Clause, the Court has applied *Flast* narrowly. Faced with a federal taxpayer challenge to a federal government transfer of a surplus World War II military hospital to a religious school, the Court declined to grant standing under *Flast*. *Valley Forge Christian College v. Americans United for Separations of Church and State* distinguished *Flast* on two grounds: first, that the transfer of property was a discretionary decision of an executive agency, rather than congressional action; second, that Congress authorized this kind of transfer under the Property Clause, rather than the taxing and spending power. As the Court suggested, these two distinctions are really manifestations of the same underlying issue: the challenged action in *Valley Forge* did not actually involve any spending. *Valley Forge* reiterates that *Flast* only allows


98. *Flast*, 392 U.S. at 105–06.

99. See DaimlerChrysler Corp., 547 U.S. at 347.

100. *Flast*, 392 U.S. at 107 (Douglas, J., concurring).


103. Id. at 479.

104. U.S. CONST. art. IV, § 3, cl. 2.


106. Id. (“Secondly, and perhaps redundantly . . . .

standing to challenge congressional spending that allegedly violates the Establishment Clause. 108

*Valley Forge* suggests that an executive agency’s discretionary acts fail the first part of the *Flast* nexus test simply because the Executive Branch, rather than the Legislative Branch, has performed the challenged action. 109 The Court later clarified, however, that once Congress has authorized spending to administer a statute, the fact that an executive agency chose to spend the appropriated funds in violation of the Establishment Clause will not preclude taxpayer standing. 110 *Bowen v. Kendrick*111 allowed standing for an as-applied challenge to the Adolescent Family Life Act112 based on grants given to religious organizations at the discretion of the Secretary of Health and Human Services. 113 The Court held that this challenge passed the first part of the *Flast* nexus test because the Secretary administered the spending of funds approved by Congress. 114 Thus clarifying the issue left open in *Valley Forge*, *Bowen* allowed standing under *Flast* for challenges to executive administration of federal statutes.115

In sum, the Court has fashioned and maintained a narrow exception to the general ban on taxpayer standing. 116 Recognizing the sound policy of *Frothingham*’s ban on generalized grievances, the Court has applied *Flast*’s two-part nexus test strictly. 117 The Court did not revisit this line of cases until *Hein v. Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc.* during the 2006 Term. 118

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109. See id.
113. See *Bowen*, 487 U.S. at 593, 618.
114. *Id.* at 619.
116. For discussion of minimalist nature of this narrow exception, see *infra* Part IV.A.
117. See, e.g., *Flast v. Cohen*, 392 U.S. 83, 106 (1968) (“We lack that confidence [to allow taxpayer standing] in cases such as *Frothingham* where a taxpayer seeks to employ a federal court as a forum in which to air his generalized grievances about the conduct of government or the allocation of power in the Federal System.”).
III. THE COURT IN HEIN DISAGREED ABOUT THE VALIDITY AND APPLICATION OF FLAST

The Court in Hein issued four separate opinions. Justice Alito wrote the plurality opinion, which Chief Justice Roberts and Justice Kennedy joined. Justice Kennedy’s concurring opinion expands on separation of powers issues. Justice Scalia, joined by Justice Thomas, concurred in the judgment but substantially disagreed with the plurality’s reasoning. Justice Souter dissented, joined by Justices Stevens, Ginsburg, and Breyer. The first section of Part III of this Note discusses the facts and procedural history of the litigation leading to the Court’s opinions. The rest of Part III explores the reasoning of each opinion.

A. Hein Challenged Certain Aspects of President Bush’s Faith-Based Initiatives

In Hein, the Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc. (FFRF) challenged both the constitutionality of conferences designed to train religious groups on how to successfully apply for federal aid, and the religiously themed speeches given at these conferences by President George W. Bush and other executive officers.119 The litigation grew out of an Executive Order120 that created the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (OFBCI) within the Executive Office of the President.121 The Order charged OFBCI with ensuring that religious groups providing community services could compete on an equal playing field with secular groups providing similar services when applying for federal aid.122 Congress did not create the OFBCI, and funding came from general Executive Branch funds rather than specific congressional appropriations.123

FFRF claimed taxpayer standing under Flast as its sole basis for standing in federal court.124 The district court dismissed the case for lack of standing because FFRF did not challenge an exercise of congressional

119. Id. at 2559.
121. Hein, 127 S. Ct. at 2559.
122. Id. at 2559–60 (citing 3 C.F.R. 752–753).
123. Id. at 2560.
124. Id. at 2561.
power. On appeal to the Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals, a divided panel reversed the district court ruling, holding that *Flast* allows standing to challenge government actions “financed by a congressional appropriation,” even if the spending was not pursuant to any statutory program. One judge dissented from the panel decision, warning that the Court of Appeals’ holding threatened to broaden standing under *Flast*. The Court of Appeals then denied rehearing en banc, and a concurring opinion suggested that the Supreme Court needed to resolve the issue. The Court granted certiorari to resolve this dispute.

The Court divided sharply, issuing four separate opinions: (1) Justice Alito’s plurality opinion, joined by Chief Justice Roberts and Justice Kennedy; (2) Justice Kennedy’s concurrence; (3) Justice Scalia’s concurrence in the judgment and disagreement with the plurality’s reasoning, joined by Justice Thomas; and (4) the dissenting opinion of the remaining four Justices, who would have found standing. When no opinion commands the support of five Justices, the narrowest opinion that concurs in the judgment controls the case. As discussed below, because the plurality opinion expressed the narrowest grounds leading to reversal of the Court of Appeals, Justice Alito’s opinion controls.

125. *Id.*


128. Freedom From Religion Found., Inc. v. Chao, 447 F.3d 988, 988 (7th Cir. 2006) (Flaum, C.J., concurring in the denial of rehearing en banc); *id.* at 989 (Easterbrook, J., concurring in the denial of rehearing en banc).


130. *Id.* at 2559.

131. *Id.* at 2572 (Kennedy, J., concurring).

132. *Id.* at 2573 (Scalia, J., concurring in the judgment).

133. *Id.* at 2584 (Souter, J., dissenting).


135. See Marks, 430 U.S. at 193; *Hein*, 127 S. Ct. at 2584 (Souter, J., dissenting) (describing Justice Alito’s opinion as controlling without explicitly stating why or citing *Marks*); see also Lupu, supra note 134, at 130, 130 n.80 (discussing whether Justice Alito’s or Justice Kennedy’s is the most narrow, but suggesting that it “may not make any tangible difference in the outcome of future cases in the lower courts”).
The plurality embraced the narrowness of *Flast* and its progeny, especially *Valley Forge*, and applied the “*Flast* exception” with “rigor.” In so doing, the plurality described *Flast* as a case involving specific and direct congressional spending alleged to violate the Establishment Clause. Focusing on the first part of the nexus test, the plurality found the link between congressional action and the challenged executive acts too attenuated to support standing. While *Bowen* allowed a challenge to the administration of a congressional statute that was left to the discretion of an executive agency, the plurality distinguished *Bowen* as only applying to the administration of federal statutes. Key to this conclusion was the plurality’s observation that FFRF “can cite no statute whose application they challenge.” Even though Congress had allocated funds for the operation of executive agencies and those funds were used to pay for the conferences at issue, Congress had played no role in the creation of the OFBCI and had imposed no restrictions on the use of these operational funds. Therefore, because FFRF had no congressional action to challenge, there was no nexus between FFRF’s taxpayer injury and Congress’s use of the taxing and spending power.

Where FFRF claimed that distinguishing between legislative and executive acts that violate the Establishment Clause did not make sense, the plurality explained that “*Flast* focused on congressional action, and we must decline this invitation to extend its holding to encompass discretionary Executive Branch expenditures.” The plurality viewed *Flast* as creating a narrow exception limited to a small range of situations, and thus followed past precedent, which had refused to apply

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137. *Id.*
138. *Id.* at 2568.
139. *Id.* at 2567.
140. *Id.*
141. *Id.* See also *id.* at 2568 n.7 (“Nor is it relevant that Congress may have informally ‘earmarked’ portions of its general Executive Branch appropriations to fund the offices and centers whose expenditures are at issue here.”).
142. *Id.* at 2568.
143. *Id.*
the *Flast* exception to other situations. 144 Separation of powers concerns informed the decision to keep *Flast* confined to congressional statutes. 145 Specifically, the Court reasoned that allowing standing to challenge the vast range of executive activities funded through general operating budgets any time a taxpayer alleges an Establishment Clause violation would seriously aggrandize the power of the judiciary at the expense of the executive. 146

In response to the charge that immunizing the executive from the type of review *Flast* imposes upon Congress would give agencies a loophole to exploit, the plurality suggested that Congress could stop such abuse through statute. 147 Also, the plurality reasoned that egregious Establishment Clause violations often produce injuries more particularized than taxpayer injury, and these injuries would support standing outside the context of *Flast*. 148 Ultimately, the plurality viewed its ruling as a narrow resolution of the case at hand. 149 Seeing no justification for expanding *Flast* and no need to overrule it, Justice Alito declared, “[w]e leave *Flast* as we found it.” 150

C. Justice Kennedy Explained in His Concurring Opinion Why Hein Is Distinguishable from Flast

Although he joined the plurality “in full,” Justice Kennedy wrote separately to explain his views on separation of powers and *Flast*. 151 Justice Kennedy agreed that *Flast* should not support standing in this case, based on concerns over separation of powers. 152 Fearing “judicial oversight of executive duties,” he stated that allowing standing for this

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144. *Id.* at 2568–69.
145. *Id.* at 2569–70.
146. *Id.* at 2569–70.
147. *Id.* at 2571.
148. *Id.* For illustrations of such injuries, see *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577, 584 (1992) (recognizing a student’s injury for being subjected to school-sponsored prayer at a graduation ceremony rather than relying on taxpayer standing); cf. *Freedom From Religion Found., Inc. v. Chao*, 433 F.3d 989, 994 (7th Cir. 2006), rev’d sub nom., *Hein*, 127 S. Ct. at 2572 (plurality opinion) (“No doubt so elaborate, so public, a subvention of religion [as a government official building a mosque with federal funds] would give rise to standing to sue on other grounds [besides taxpayer standing].”).
149. *Hein*, 127 S. Ct. at 2572.
150. *Id.* at 2571–72.
151. *Id.* at 2572 (Kennedy, J., concurring).
152. *Hein*, 127 S. Ct. at 2572.
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type of case would cast the courts in the “role of speech editors . . . and
event planners” for the Executive Branch. Mindful of the potential for
abuse in situations where plaintiffs will have a hard time gaining
standing to challenge the Executive Branch, Justice Kennedy stated that
government officials must “conform their actions” to the Constitution.

Regarding Flast’s validity, Justice Kennedy gave Flast a much
warmer embrace than the plurality, declaring that “the result reached in
Flast is correct and should not be called into question.” On the one
hand, discussion of the soundness of Flast’s holding as a policy matter,
being unnecessary to the plurality’s conclusion, reaches more broadly
and should not be controlling. Yet, when combined with the four
dissenting Justices that clearly support Flast, Justice Kennedy’s view
commands a majority of the Court in this respect and could be viewed as
a controlling statement.

D. Justice Scalia Urged Broadly Overruling Flast

In stark contrast to the plurality’s minimalism, Justice Scalia’s
opinion called for a complete reversal of Flast on all grounds, regardless
of the case at hand. Justice Scalia portrayed the taxpayer injury in
cases like Flast as a “Psychic Injury” and questioned why such mental
injuries should ever support standing. Calling Flast and the cases
following it a “jurisprudential disaster,” Justice Scalia argued that
overruling was the only principled approach. This opinion attacked
the plurality’s minimalist approach for being based on meaningless

153. Id. at 2572–73.
154. Id. at 2573.
155. Id.
157. Cf. Lupu, supra note 134, at 130 (suggesting that Justice Kennedy’s opinion may be more
narrow because it is “more respectful of the pre-existing law,” thus supporting the inference that
five Justices agree that Flast is good law).
158. Id. at 2573–74 (Scalia, J., concurring in the judgment).
159. Id. at 2574–75. Use of the term “Psychic Injury” leads to confusion, because some “psychic”
injuries, like infliction of mental distress, are sufficient for standing, while “ideological” injuries
generally are not. See Cass R. Sunstein, What’s Standing After Lujan? Of Citizen Suits, “Injuries,”
160. For a previous “jurisprudential disaster,” see Lee v. Weisman, 505 U.S. 577, 644 (1992)
(Scalia, J., dissenting). Lee recognized religious “coercion” as an Establishment Clause violation.
Id. at 604 (Blackman, J., concurring).
distinctions used to distinguish past precedent. Thus, Justice Scalia argued that Doremus cannot be reconciled with Flast and that more generally, Flast is inconsistent with the constitutional limits on standing described in Lujan v. Defenders of Wildlife because taxpayer injury can never be an injury in fact.

E. Justice Souter Argued in His Dissenting Opinion That Hein and Flast Present the Same Injury

In his dissent, Justice Souter argued that the injury to taxpayers is the same whether Congress or the Executive Branch spends the funds, and thus, that standing should exist for both types of claims. Rather than reading Flast narrowly to allow standing only to challenge spending pursuant to a congressional mandate, the dissent read Flast to apply logically no matter which branch of the government spent the funds. The dissent also recognized the distinction between Flast and Doremus, but suggested that because identifiable amounts of federal funds financed the challenged conferences, Doremus did not preclude standing for FFRF. Addressing separation of powers, the dissent argued that Flast already allowed federal court plaintiffs to challenge these types of congressional spending decisions and that the Executive Branch should receive no more insulation from these lawsuits than Congress. Finally, regarding the plurality’s distinguishing of Bowen, Justice Souter saw no difference between discretion in the administration of a statute and discretion outside the administration of a statute.

IV. Hein Exemplifies the Proper Role ofMinimalism in Judicial Decisionmaking

Having explored the foundation of Establishment Clause taxpayer standing and having surveyed the various opinions in Hein, the question

162. Id. at 2582.
163. Id. at 2577.
165. See Hein, 127 S. Ct. at 2574.
166. Id. at 2584–85 (Souter, J., dissenting).
167. Id.
168. See id. at 2585.
169. Id. at 2586.
170. Id.
remains whether minimalism makes sense in the context of taxpayer standing doctrine. By “not doing”\textsuperscript{171} the deathblow to \textit{Flast} and instead doing only what was necessary to resolve the case at hand, the plurality avoided issuing a broad ruling that would reach too far. Of the competing opinions in \textit{Hein}, the plurality opinion is the most consistent with the values of minimalism and the limited role of federal courts.

This Part argues first that the Establishment Clause exception for taxpayer standing is itself a minimalist doctrine intended to allow standing in a narrow range of cases without allowing the exception to swallow the rule against taxpayer standing. The minimalist nature of \textit{Flast} supports the minimalist solution in \textit{Hein}. Second, \textit{Flast} is consistent with other standing decisions. Third, under the \textit{Casey} factors, there is a lack of compelling reasons to abandon the Establishment Clause taxpayer standing doctrine that \textit{Flast v. Cohen} created, supporting the plurality’s minimalist solution in \textit{Hein}. Fourth, the potential negative effects of the plurality’s narrow ruling are speculative and should be left for later resolution if the need arises. Finally, some situations demand broader rulings, providing limits to the usefulness of minimalism.

\textbf{A. Flast Created a Minimalist Doctrine}

The Court’s narrow holding in \textit{Flast}, which created the two-part nexus test as a limited exception to the general ban on federal taxpayer standing, exhibits many minimalist qualities. Most significantly, the Court could have overruled \textit{Frothingham} and opened up a vast realm of taxpayer standing, as indeed one member of the Court advocated.\textsuperscript{172} Instead, the Court distinguished \textit{Frothingham} as failing the second part of the nexus test because the constitutional provisions invoked by the \textit{Frothingham} plaintiffs\textsuperscript{173} did not impose limitations on the taxing and

\textsuperscript{171} See \textit{Bickel}, supra note 1, at 71.
\textsuperscript{172} \textit{Flast}, 392 U.S. at 107 (1968) (Douglas, J., concurring) (arguing that the narrow exception will slowly get larger and erode \textit{Frothingham} and that the Court should overrule \textit{Frothingham}). The majority viewed \textit{Frothingham} favorably and fashioned the exception in \textit{Flast} very narrowly to preserve \textit{Frothingham} in most situations. See id. at 106 (majority opinion) (“We lack that confidence [to allow taxpayer standing] in cases such as \textit{Frothingham} where a taxpayer seeks to employ a federal court as a forum in which to air his generalized grievances about the conduct of government or the allocation of power in the Federal System.”).
spending power.\textsuperscript{174} While \textit{Frothingham} broadly banned federal taxpayer standing,\textsuperscript{175} \textit{Flast} gave \textit{Frothingham} a narrower scope.\textsuperscript{176} Even more minimally, the Court in \textit{Flast} declined to name any constitutional provisions other than the Establishment Clause that limit Congress’s taxing and spending power.\textsuperscript{177} The Court went only as far as necessary, leaving the evaluation of other constitutional provisions to “the context of future cases.”\textsuperscript{178} By creating a narrow exception with a minimal scope, the Court ensured that \textit{Flast}’s limited exception would not become a large one that would lead to the abandonment of the principles underlying the general rule of \textit{Frothingham}.\textsuperscript{179} Subsequent cases have clarified and limited \textit{Flast}, maintaining the minimalist nature of the Establishment Clause taxpayer standing doctrine.\textsuperscript{180}

\textbf{B. Flast Is Consistent with Standing Doctrine Generally}

\textit{Flast} has not been overruled by the constitutionalization of standing.\textsuperscript{181} In his opinion, Justice Scalia argued that \textit{Flast} improperly allows standing without any particularized injury,\textsuperscript{182} but \textit{Federal Election Commission v. Akins}\textsuperscript{183} suggests that taxpayer injury can be a valid injury for standing purposes.\textsuperscript{184} \textit{Lujan v. Defenders of Wildlife} held

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174 \textit{Flast}, 392 U.S. at 105.
175 \textit{Frothingham}, 262 U.S. at 487.
176 \textit{Flast}, 392 U.S. at 105. However, because the \textit{Flast} exception to \textit{Frothingham} is quite narrow, \textit{Frothingham} only went from being always applicable to almost always applicable. See Hein v. Freedom From Religion Found., Inc., 551 U.S. ___ (June 25, 2007), 127 S. Ct. 2553, 2564–65 (2007) (plurality opinion); United States v. Richardson, 418 U.S. 166, 173 (1974).
177 \textit{Flast}, 392 U.S. at 105.
178 Id.
179 See supra Part II.
180 See supra Part II.C.
182 See Hein, 127 S. Ct. at 2582–83 (Scalia, J., concurring in judgment).
184 See id. at 24 (“Often the fact that an interest is abstract and the fact that it is widely shared go hand in hand. But their association is not invariably, and where a harm is concrete, though

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that the Constitution requires a plaintiff to claim a valid injury to have standing to sue in federal court.185 Defining what constitutes a valid injury, however, involves prudential decisions by the Court rather than clear constitutional directives.186 Thus, consistent with Lujan and constitutional standing doctrine, the Court can declare certain injuries as valid for standing purposes, as in fact the Court has done in cases such as Flast and Akins.

Justice Scalia also argued in his Hein concurrence that Flast fashioned its two-part nexus to circumvent prior precedent.187 But, Doremus and Flast have managed to coexist based on the distinction between statutes that command certain behavior and statutes that create spending programs.188 In the former case, Congress has not invoked the power to tax and spend, while in the latter case, it has.189 Though almost all government action involves some expenditure of funds,190 there is a meaningful difference between spending incidental to regulatory activity191 and spending pursuant to a statutory mandate.192 Invoking the power to tax and spend in violation of a specific constitutional limitation on that power is what underlies the Flast nexus test. Similar to Doremus, in Hein, FFRF lacked standing because it did not challenge an exercise of the taxing and spending power.193 While Justice Scalia did not accept such a distinction, the plurality did, and thus the plurality could deny

widely shared, the Court has found injury in fact.”) (citations omitted); see also Hein, 127 S. Ct. at 2587 n.3 (Souter, J., dissenting) (citing Akins to suggest the harm in Hein was concrete and widely shared).


186. See Flast v. Cohen, 392 U.S. 83, 120 (1968) (Harlan, J., dissenting) (“It does not, however, follow that suits brought by [plaintiffs claiming non-standard injuries] are excluded by the ‘case or controversy’ clause of Article III of the Constitution from the jurisdiction of the federal courts.”); cf. Sunstein, supra note 159, at 190 (“Whether there is a so-called nonjusticiable ideological interest, or instead a legally cognizable ‘actual injury,’ is a product of legal conventions and nothing else.”); Fletcher, supra note 68, at 232 (“A statement that a plaintiff . . . suffered no ‘injury in fact’ [is] based on some normative judgment about what ought to constitute a judicially cognizable injury . . . [and] not whether an actual injury occurred.”).

187. Hein, 127 S. Ct. at 2577 (Scalia, J., concurring in the judgment) (arguing that the first prong of the nexus test circumvents Doremus, and the second prong does the same with Frothingham).

188. See supra note 89.

189. See id.

190. See Hein, 127 S. Ct. at 2569 (plurality opinion).

191. See Flast, 392 U.S. at 102 (1968).


standing without having to overrule any precedent.194 Such an approach avoids a broad ruling and potential “jurisprudential disasters”195 that might otherwise follow, choosing instead to confront such “disasters” when they materialize.

C. Overruling Flast at This Time Is Inconsistent with Stare Decisis

By arguing to overrule Flast, Justice Scalia advocated abandoning the continued reliance on Flast as precedent. Although the Court did not need to overrule Flast to reach its judgment in Hein, Justice Scalia, in his opinion concurring in the judgment, posed the question of whether Flast merits continued adherence. This section weighs the factors discussed in Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pennsylvania v. Casey196 that provide guidance when deciding whether to overrule precedent.

Although the Court has essentially limited Flast to its facts,197 the principles of stare decisis discussed in Casey do not support its abrogation.198 Regarding the first Casey factor—practical workability—Flast, Valley Forge, Bowen, and Hein demonstrate that taxpayer standing doctrine is capable of working in practice.199 Second, although Flast arguably may not have created a strong reliance interest for plaintiffs because “one does not arrange his affairs with an eye to standing,”200 a precedent should not be overruled simply because few will mourn its passing.201 A lack of reliance reduces the consequences of overruling a precedent but does not provide a principled reason for abandoning settled law.202 Third, Flast is not a remnant of an abandoned

194 Compare id. at 2577 (Scalia, J., concurring in the judgment) with id. at 2568 (plurality opinion).
195 See supra note 160.
197. See Hein, 127 S. Ct. at 2568–69.
198. For a discussion of the Casey factors, see supra Part I.C.
199. Compare Ams. United for Separation of Church & State v. Prison Fellowship Ministries, Inc., 509 F.3d 406, 420 (8th Cir. 2007) (applying Hein to find taxpayer standing based on specific appropriations by the Iowa legislature) with Hein, 127 S. Ct. at 2584 (Scalia, J., concurring in judgment) and Freedom From Religion Found., Inc. v. Chao, 447 F.3d 986, 989–90 (7th Cir. 2006) (Easterbrook, J., concurring in denial of rehearing en banc) (stating there is “no logical way to determine the extent of an arbitrary rule”).
200. Hein, 127 S. Ct. at 2584 (Scalia, J., concurring in the judgment).
202. Cf. id.; Casey, 505 U.S. at 855–56 (discussing the reliance interest of precedent).
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document no matter how one frames the relevant doctrine. Finally, *Flast* does not rely on such outdated facts that it has lost “significant application or justification.” Even if *Hein* presents weak facts, the underlying system of faith-based initiatives presents live constitutional issues without easy resolution.

Justice Scalia may disagree with the Court that taxpayers suffer a judicially cognizable injury, but the doctrine of stare decisis does not allow overruling precedent just because the Court might have ruled on this issue differently from the way the Court ruled in *Flast*. Because *Flast* fits within the broad and varied umbrella of standing doctrine, *Flast* remains a vital part of a living doctrine and should not be overruled, even if the Court were forced to decide that question. While future development of the law may eventually render *Flast* an anachronism, minimalism demands that overruling wait until the arrival of these future developments.

D. Potential Abuses of Loopholes Created by *Hein* Should Be Adjudicated When and if They Arise

Because minimalism seeks to reduce the risk and limit the scope of judicial error, the plurality opinion’s success depends upon the potential negative consequences it might create. Justice Souter argued in his dissent that the plurality’s distinction between legislative and executive action creates an improper disparity in taxpayer standing doctrine that could lead to abuse by creative executive agencies. Justice Scalia went even further, suggesting some ways such abuse could

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203. If the doctrine at issue is taxpayer standing generally, then *Flast* is a narrowly carved exception to the general doctrine banning taxpayer standing. *See supra* Part II. Instead, if the relevant doctrine is Establishment Clause taxpayer standing, that doctrine has at least some life, as evidenced by its continued litigation. *See, e.g.*, Ams. United for Separation of Church & State v. Prison Fellowship Ministries, Inc., 509 F.3d 406, 420 (8th Cir. 2007) (recognizing taxpayer standing for a challenge to prison religious programs). Likewise, if standing doctrine itself is the relevant issue, this doctrine too has not been abandoned. *See supra* Part II.


205. *See, e.g.*, Equal Treatment in Dep’t of Labor Programs for Faith-Based & Cmty. Orgs., 69 Fed. Reg. 41,882, 41,884–86 (July 12, 2004) (responding to public commentary about the proposed rule through extensive legal argument about the rule’s constitutionality).

206. *See* Dickerson, 530 U.S. at 443.


209. *See* Hein, 127 S. Ct. at 2586 (Souter, J., dissenting).
occur.\textsuperscript{210} For example, Congress could try to immunize an agency from taxpayer challenges either by allocating generic operational funds or by expressly limiting the use of funds to programs that comply with the Establishment Clause.\textsuperscript{211} Although the former might be more effective than the latter under \textit{Hein},\textsuperscript{212} both involve spending pursuant to a federal statute. \textit{Bowen} suggests, and \textit{Hein} seems to reinforce, that as long as Congress creates the specific spending program at issue, the nexus will exist to support taxpayer standing.\textsuperscript{213}

Ultimately, these concerns do not amount to much.\textsuperscript{214} Speculating about these concerns presents a deeper problem: this involves extended hypothesizing about facts not before the Court. While judges naturally consider the future effects of their rulings, minimalists decide one case at a time and reconcile previous rulings with the unique facts of later cases as they arise.\textsuperscript{215} When litigants in subsequent cases argue for precedent to be applied in ways that reach questionable results, courts can modify the doctrine at issue to avoid such problems.\textsuperscript{216} This is exactly what the plurality did in \textit{Hein}: it declined to extend \textit{Flast} outside the realm of congressional action.\textsuperscript{217} Once the hypothetical abuses imagined by Justices Scalia and Souter come before the Court, if they ever do come

\textsuperscript{210} Id. at 2580 (Scalia, J., concurring in the judgment).

\textsuperscript{211} Id.

\textsuperscript{212} The former example at least leaves the choice of how to spend the appropriated funds to executive discretion, thus minimizing congressional involvement in the way the funds are spent. The latter example involves more congressional involvement, and thus more of a nexus. \textit{But see id. at 2580} (Scalia, J., concurring in the judgment) (arguing that the plurality’s reasoning would allow Congress to immunize executive action from suit simply by “codifying the truism that no appropriation can be spent by the Executive Branch in a manner that violates the Establishment Clause.”).

\textsuperscript{213} See \textit{Hein}, 127 S. Ct. at 2567 (plurality opinion); \textit{Bowen} v. Kendrick, 487 U.S. 589, 619–20 (1988); \textit{cf. Heid}, 127 S. Ct. at 2568 (suggesting that a congressional statute creating the spending program is prerequisite to standing under \textit{Flast}).

\textsuperscript{214} \textit{Compare Heid}, 127 S. Ct. at 2586 (Souter, J., dissenting) (arguing that the executive can now “accomplish through the exercise of discretion exactly what Congress cannot do through legislation”) \textit{with id. at 2571} (plurality opinion) (noting that egregious actions like using “discretionary funds to build a house of worship” are both unlikely and remediable without taxpayer standing). It is worth noting, however, that President Bush only created the OFBCI through Executive Order after legislative attempts stalled in Congress. See Lupu, \textit{supra} note 135, at 48–49. Had Congress created the OFBCI through statute, FFRF might well have had standing under \textit{Flast}. Id.

\textsuperscript{215} See SUNSTEIN, \textit{supra} note 3, at 44.

\textsuperscript{216} Id. at 44–45.

\textsuperscript{217} See \textit{Hein}, 127 S. Ct. at 2571.
before the Court, the Court can, with the benefit of fully developed facts, evaluate whether to modify taxpayer standing doctrine to address such abuse. The minimalist judge leaves such thorny issues for later resolution, addressing them only if facts arise that require facing them directly. If the abuses hypothesized in Hein never emerge, then the plurality wisely avoided grappling with them prematurely.

E. Minimalism Is Not Always the Appropriate Method of Adjudication

Minimalism reaches its limit when fundamental notions of justice demand a ruling more expansive than minimalism provides. Some cases demand broad rulings, perhaps the most famous and revered being the landmark school desegregation case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. Such a rare and monumental case demands sweeping moral judgment: by 1954, the societal view of the Constitution had evolved to reject segregation to such an extent that the Court realistically could not avoid resolving the issue. A minimalist ruling—holding, perhaps, that although Topeka’s segregation program violated the Constitution, the school segregation programs in Virginia and Delaware could survive constitutional scrutiny—would likely have encouraged school districts to craftily tailor programs that fit within some narrower scope of acceptable discrimination. By contrast, consider the cases from 1976 that struck down some state death penalty laws while upholding others. Rather than holding the death penalty either constitutional or unconstitutional per se, the Court interpreted the Eighth Amendment’s ban on cruel and unusual punishment to permit death penalty statutes that provide clear criteria for imposing the sentence but allow for discretion in the

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218. There is sufficient doubt whether such abuses might occur. See Hein, 127 S. Ct. at 2571.
219. Cf. id. (“In the unlikely event that any of these [hypothetical] executive actions did take place, Congress could quickly step in.”).
220. See SUNSTEIN, supra note 3, at 37–38.
222. Brown involved consolidated cases challenging school segregation programs in Delaware, Kansas, South Carolina, and Virginia. Brown, 347 U.S. at 486.
penalty’s imposition. After the Court handed down these minimalist opinions, states could narrowly tailor their statutes to fit within the approved ranges.

The decision to issue a broad ruling carries great risk and should not be made lightly. Brown came as the culmination of a protracted series of cases chipping away at the block of Jim Crow and thirteen years after the Court avoided the issue in Pullman. Other famous broad cases, like Dred Scott v. Sandford and Roe v. Wade, came suddenly, without buildup, and either proved disastrous (Dred Scott) or highly contentious (Roe). Only when the Court can be certain its moral judgment is correct and necessary should it issue such broad rulings, and even then this path is fraught with risk: the Court in Dred Scott perhaps felt the same moral certainty as the Court in Brown.

In the context of Establishment Clause taxpayer standing, the likelihood of such a morally compelling case seems unlikely because standing decisions focus on procedural requirements, rather than on the underlying substantive rights. Although Establishment Clause cases decided on the merits may call for broad rulings at times, standing doctrine is a naturally minimalist area of the law that seeks to limit court decisions on the merits to situations that require such adjudication. Flast opened courthouse doors that were previously closed by Frothingham, but only enough to let the occasional plaintiff plead an Establishment Clause claim. Rather than eroding away at the

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226. SUNSTEIN, supra note 3, at 38.
227. See supra Part I.
228. 60 U.S. (19 How.) 393 (1856).
231. See id. at 37 (“Dred Scott] shows that judicial efforts to resolve questions of political morality now and for all time may well be futile.”).
232. The Establishment Clause taxpayer standing doctrine focuses on the nature of the underlying right, but it does not consider the merits of the specific alleged violation.
233. See, e.g., Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of Ewing, 330 U.S. 1, 15 (1947) (incorporating the Establishment Clause to be applicable to the states, and beginning the intense judicial scrutiny of government involvement with religion).
234. See BICKEL, supra note 1, at 117.
235. See supra Part II.
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_Frothingham_ ban, as Justice Douglas predicted,^{236} _Flast_ created a narrow way for courts to hear seemingly meritorious Establishment Clause cases without abandoning the ban on generalized grievances.^{237} Cases like _Valley Forge_, _Bowen_, and _Hein_ use minimalism to develop the _Flast_ doctrine incrementally, leaving room for further corrections as needed. Just as _Bowen_ clarified _Valley Forge_ and _Hein_ clarified _Bowen_, ambiguities in _Hein_ can be clarified when required by the next case.

Over time, if the _Flast_ exception leads to unacceptable results or constitutional standing doctrine shifts to such an extent that _Flast_ becomes anachronistic and unworkable, then the time may arrive to issue a broad ruling overturning _Flast_, much like _Brown_ overturned _Plessy v. Ferguson_.^{238} On the other hand, perhaps morally compelling cases will emerge where _Flast_ does not support standing and yet only taxpayers have any claim of injury at all. If the Court feels the moral duty to reach the merits on such a case, the minimalist approach taken by the plurality in _Hein_ would not suffice. Justice Breyer suggested some hypothetical situations during oral argument in _Hein_ that might fit this situation.^{239} Ultimately, such hypothetical cases would have to be evaluated on their facts if they ever actually arose, and the Court would have to decide if the merits were so compelling as to warrant finding standing, even if a narrow reading of standing doctrine counseled otherwise.^{240}

V. CONCLUSION

Minimalism provides a method by which courts can address the narrow issues necessary to resolve the case at hand without broadly reaching out to decide, possibly erroneously, issues beyond the scope of

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237. For an argument that all standing decisions should be evaluations of the merits of the case, see generally _Fletcher_, supra note 68.


239. Transcript of Oral Argument at 16–19, _Hein v. Freedom From Religion Found, Inc._, 551 U.S. ___ (June 25, 2007), 127 S. Ct. 2553 (2007) (No. 06-157). Justice Breyer’s first hypothetical asked if a taxpayer would have standing to challenge the federal government’s construction of an official church at Plymouth Rock to commemorate the Pilgrims. _Id._ at 16. Justice Breyer also questioned whether taxpayer standing would be available to challenge a federal statute establishing one religion but that did not give money to any private religious groups. _Id._ at 17–18.

240. See generally _Lupu_, supra note 134, at 155–64 (exploring the availability of both taxpayer standing and other forms of standing for difficult Establishment Clause cases post-Hein).
the current case. The Court developed Establishment Clause taxpayer standing in *Flast* as a narrow exception to the rule against federal taxpayer standing based on a two-part nexus test designed to limit standing to cases where taxpayer injury could be directly linked to the exercise of Congress’s taxing and spending power. Subsequent cases construed this exception narrowly, and the plurality in *Hein* maintained this minimalist approach by refusing to extend *Flast* to cover purely executive actions without Congress’s involvement. Over strong calls for the reversal of *Flast*, the plurality in *Hein* distinguished past cases to deny standing without disrupting precedent. Although this minimalist approach left open some difficult questions about separation of powers and possible abuses of executive discretion, these questions were properly left to be resolved later, should the need arise. Because the plurality avoided unnecessarily overruling precedent and left difficult, though hypothetical, problems to be resolved only when later cases demand resolution, this minimalist approach resolved the case at hand without running the risk of overreaching and making errors where no actions were needed. While the minimalist approach may fail in exceptional cases, for the majority of decisions, especially in areas of justiciability, the best thing the Court does is “not doing.”

241. See BICKEL, supra note 1, at 71.