STATE OF MICHIGAN
COURT OF CLAIMS

ROBERT LaBRANT, et al., Plaintiffs, v JOCELYN BENSON, in her official capacity as Secretary of State, Defendant	Case No. 23-000137-MZ Hon. James Robert Redford

Mark Brewer
Rowan E. Conybeare
GOODMAN ACKER P.C.
Attorneys for Robert LaBrant et al.
17000 W. Ten Mile Road
Southfield, MI 48975
(248) 483-5000
mbrewer@goodmanacker.com

Heather S. Meingast
Erik A. Grill
Assistant Attorneys General
Attorneys for Jocelyn Benson
P.O. Box 30736
Lansing, MI 48909
(517) 335-7659
meingasth@michigan.gov
grille@michigan.gov

Patrick N. Strawbridge*
CONSOVOY MCCARTHY PLLC
Ten Post Office Square
8th Floor South PMB #706
Boston, MA 02109
(617) 227-0548 patrick@consovoymccarthy.com

Matthew T. Nelson (P64768)
Troy M. Cumings (P63278)
WARNER NORCROSS + JUDD LLP
150 Ottawa Avenue, N.W., Suite 1500
Grand Rapids, MI 49508
(616) 752-2000
mnelson@wnj.com
tcumings@wnj.com

Gilbert C. Dickey*
Jeffrey S. Hetzel*
CONSOVOY MCCARTHY PLLC
1600 Wilson Blvd., Ste. 700
Arlington, VA 22209
703-243-9423
*pro hac vice application forthcoming

Counsel for Amici Republican National Committee, National Republican Senatorial Committee, and National Republican Congressional Committee

Proposed Amici Curiae Brief of Republican National Committee, National Republican Senatorial Committee, and National Republican Congressional Committee in Opposition to Robert LaBrant, et al.

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INTEREST OF AMICI CURIAE

Amici Republican National Committee, National Republican Senatorial Committee, and National Republican Congressional Committee—collectively, National Republican Amici—are political organizations that help their members achieve electoral victories at the local, state, and national level, and who work to ensure a fair and equal electoral process. National Republican Amici have an interest in controlling their primaries and nominating the candidates of their choice. They also have an interest in ensuring that the rules governing elections are lawful and fairly applied. And they have an interest in promoting any of their potential nominees' ballot eligibility and electoral success.

INTRODUCTION

National Republican Amici respectfully oppose the requests of Robert LaBrant, et al.—collectively, "Plaintiffs"—to remove former President Donald J. Trump from the 2024 primary and general election ballots in Michigan.[1]

The Reconstruction Congress did not grant state officials sweeping authority to undermine the federal government. But Plaintiffs have resurrected and reimagined Section Three of the Fourteenth Amendment to do just that. Their complaints make a series of legal errors, and this Court should reject them. First and foremost, this court is the wrong forum for this dispute. Plaintiffs seek to rewrite the text of Section Three to prohibit not just "hold[ing] office" but running for it, thereby authorizing pre-election adjudication that ultimately denies voters and Congress a say. Their theory of enforcement depends on the historically unreasonable proposition that the Reconstruction Congress gave States, including former Confederate States, the power to independently decide which national candidates and officeholders were illegitimate. Their proposed relief would interfere with political-party primaries, which violates Republicans' First Amendment rights. They misread the text and history to apply Section Three to former Presidents and future Presidents, even though the text references the Article VI oath of office that no President has ever taken. And last, they defy Congress's choice to end Section Three enforcement long ago.

"The people are the best judges [of] who ought to represent them. To dictate and control them, to tell them whom they shall not elect, is to abridge their natural rights." *US Term Limits, Inc. v Thornton*, 514 US 779, 794-795 (1995) (internal quotation marks omitted). Plaintiffs set forth a broad theory of Section Three's enforcement and scope that would displace that right and would have predictable escalation effects. They then invite this Court to fire the first shot. Even former President

[1] No counsel for any party authored this brief in whole or in part, and no person other than amici or their counsel made a monetary contribution to the brief's preparation or submission.

Trump's most public critics, however, hope that cooler heads prevail. *E.g.*, Lessig, *A Terrible Plan to Neutralize Trump Has Entranced the Legal World*, Slate (Sept 19, 2023), perma.cc/98J9-FFUU; Calabresi, *President Trump Can Not Be Disqualified*, Wall St J (Sept 12, 2023), perma.cc/RX7S-RGF8; Feldman, *Alas, Trump Is Still Eligible to Run for Office*, Wash Post (Aug 20, 2023), perma.cc/T5DT-V7BV. And so does Secretary Benson. See Benson, *It's Not Up to Secretaries of State Like Me to Keep Trump off the Ballot*, Wash Post (Sept 13, 2023), perma.cc/5GA3-5WVQ.

Amici Republican National Committee, National Republican Senatorial Committee, and National Republican Congressional Committee—collectively, National Republican Amici—do not take sides in presidential primary battles or endorse particular presidential primary candidates in open elections. Plaintiffs' arguments, however, threaten massive upheaval to the political process and future national candidates of all parties. This Court should not alter the ballot for the 2024 Republican primary and general elections.

ARGUMENT

Section Three of the Fourteenth Amendment does not authorize Plaintiffs' requested relief. It provides that "[n]o person shall be a Senator or Representative in Congress, or elector of President and Vice President, or hold any office, civil or military, under the United States, or under any state, who, having previously taken an oath, as a member of Congress, or as an officer of the United States, or as a member of any state legislature, or as an executive or judicial officer of any state, to support the Constitution of the United States, shall have engaged in insurrection or rebellion against the same, or given aid or comfort to the enemies thereof." US Const, amend XIV, sec 3. It then authorizes Congress to "by a vote of two-thirds of each House, remove such disability." *Id.* It does not apply here for several independent reasons.

I. This is not the appropriate forum for this dispute.

A. Section Three does not apply until after an election.

Section Three cannot be enforced at the ballot stage. It governs only who can "hold" office. US Const, amend XIV, sec 3. It does not govern who can "run for" office or "be elected to" anything. To "hold" office means to presently possess it. See *Hold*, Black's Law Dictionary (2d ed 1910) ("[T]o possess; to occupy; to be in possession and administration of; as to hold office."); *Hold*, Webster's American Dictionary of the English Language (1828) ("To have; as, to *hold* a place, office or title."). And regardless of whether Section Three is self-executing, any "'prophylactic'" extension must come from Congress. *Allen v Cooper*, 140 S Ct 994, 1004 (2020). Former President Trump does not "hold" office by running for or being elected as President, so Section Three does not forbid him from either.

This interpretation is consistent with the rest of the Constitution. The Constitution always uses "hold" to refer to present occupation of the office, not the period of candidacy or election. See, *e.g.*, US Const art II, sec 1 ("He shall hold his Office during the Term of four Years..."); *id.* art I, sec 6 ("[N]o Person holding any Office under the United States, shall be a Member of either House...."). On Plaintiffs' account, Section Three deviates from this consistent usage despite no textual or historical evidence to support that reading.

Historical practice shows that Section Three did not apply before elections. See *Chiafalo v Washington*, 140 S Ct 2316, 2326 (2020) ("'Long settled and established practice' may have 'great weight in a proper interpretation of constitutional provisions.'"); *NLRB v Noel Canning*, 573 US 513, 525 (2014) ("the longstanding practice of the government can inform our determination of what the law is" (cleaned up)). After the ratification of Section Three, several candidates' qualifications were challenged under Section Three. *Hinds' Precedents of the House of Representatives of the United States* 474-86 (1907) [hereinafter *Hinds'*]. In each case, the challenges were *not decided* by election officials or judges, and not before the election. Instead, Congress resolved the challenges *after* the candidate won his

election through an evidentiary and deliberative process. See, *e.g.*, 41 Cong Globe 948-49, 2135, 5443-46, 5195-96 (1869-70).

Even when the challenged candidate was obviously disqualified—such as when he led Confederate troops in violent battles against the United States—the candidate did not implicate Section Three until he sought to "hold" office *after* the election. *See Hinds'* 478-86. At that time, a formal complaint would be lodged, Congress would hear evidence, and Congress would decide before the person was sworn in. See, *e.g.*, *Hinds'* 474-86; 41 Cong Globe 948-49, 2135, 5443-46, 5195-96 (1869-70). Courts did not decide qualification pre-election; it was a "political question beyond the competence of courts to decide." *Vermilya-Brown Co v Connell*, 335 US 377, 380 (1948).

Pre-election enforcement would also thwart Section Three's design. The last clause of Section Three gives Congress the power to "remove" the disability. US Const, amend XIV, sec 3. So Congress can ultimately seat anyone, regardless of whether they are qualified. But if state officials can impose the disability preemptively at the ballot stage, it would deprive Congress of this power and render the last clause meaningless in many cases. Of course, "[t]here is a presumption against a construction which would render a [provision] ineffective or inefficient." *Bird v United States*, 187 US 118, 124 (1902); see also *Myers v United States*, 272 US 52, 229 (1926) ("'It cannot be presumed that any clause in the Constitution is intended to be without effect.'").

Finally, pre-election enforcement of Section Three silences voters. "The people are the best judges [of] who ought to represent them. To dictate and control them, to tell them whom they shall not elect, is to abridge their natural rights." *Thornton*, 514 US at 794-795 (quoting 2 *Debates on the Federal Constitution* 292-293 (Elliot ed 1876) (Livingston)). But for a court to decide this question before the people can vote is to do exactly that. " 'The true principle of a republic," in Alexander Hamilton's famous words, "is[] that the people should choose whom they please to govern them.' " *Powell v McCormack*, 395 US 486, 540-541 (1969) (brackets omitted) (quoting 2 *Debates on the Federal Constitution*

257 (Elliot ed 1876) (A. Hamilton)). Nothing more subverts that principle than pre-emptive ballot cleansing by government officials. Ballot cleansing makes our government no longer one " 'by the people.' " *Thornton*, 514 US at 821 (quoting Lincoln, Gettysburg Address (1863)). Section Three's text and history do not allow it.

B. Section Three, a Reconstruction measure, did not give state officials power to frustrate the federal government or national will.

Plaintiffs' interpretation of Section Three is especially unlikely given the historical context. The overwhelming import of the Reconstruction Amendments, including the Fourteenth Amendment, was to weaken the ability of state governments to disrupt the mechanisms of the national government. "Those Amendments were specifically designed as an expansion of federal power and an intrusion on state sovereignty." *City of Rome v United States*, 446 US 156, 179 (1980).

Yet Plaintiffs would transform Section Three into a states'-rights superpower. On their account, the Reconstruction Congress gave *state* officials—here, state courts and state election officials—the power to decide the most sensitive political questions about loyalty and legitimacy, and to then decide on that basis who may stand for election to the most important position in the *national* government. Plaintiffs' claim—that the Reconstruction Congress gave States, including former Confederate States, the power to independently decide national candidates' qualifications with no congressional permission—is implausible. See *Yellen v Confederated Tribes of Chehalis Rsrv*, 141 S Ct 2434, 2448 (2021) (discounting interpretation because of its "highly counterintuitive result").

Plaintiffs' theory that Section Three is "self-executing" goes even further. As Plaintiffs' supporters explain, "anybody who possesses legal authority" at the state level can decide Section Three qualification not only in a pre-election ballot lawsuit, but also in lawsuits seeking to treat any later official actions as void. Baude & Paulsen, *The Sweep and Force of Section Three*, 172 U Pa L Rev, 22-29 (forthcoming 2024). After all, "[t]hose who cannot constitutionally hold office cannot constitutionally

exercise government power, so the subjects of that power can challenge their acts as *ultra vires*" and have them nullified. *Id.* at 29.

That is the last thing the Reconstruction Congress would have done. Section Three was enacted by the Reconstruction Congress as it fought to reassert its authority over States that warred against it and viewed the federal government and its officials as illegitimate. See Paschal, *The Constitution of the United States Defined and Carefully Annotated* xxiv (1868) (explaining that the Reconstruction-era amendments' purpose and effect were to "enlarge[] the powers of the nation, [and] abridge[] those of the States"). At the state level, many officials still believed that the Confederate States were legitimate and the Union was illegitimate. See generally Nicoletti, *Secession on Trial: The Treason Prosecution of Jefferson Davis* (2017). If Section Three gave a wide range of *state* officials the power to disqualify any candidates whom—in the state officials' views—engaged in insurrection or rebellion, then it would have been a self-sabotaging laughingstock. On Plaintiffs' theory, the Reconstruction Congress gave state officials a secessionist's dream: a new *constitutional* basis to not only eliminate pro-Union candidates from the ballot, but also nullify acts of that official, including their enactment or enforcement of federal legislation. See Baude & Paulsen, 172 U Pa L Rev at 17-35. The Reconstruction Congress didn't do that.

The imprudence of Plaintiffs' approach remains obvious today. Plaintiffs and their amici define "engag[ing]" in an "insurrection or rebellion" remarkably broadly. On their theory, these terms cover any support, including pure speech, for anyone's "attempt to overturn or displace lawful government authority by unlawful means" or "'violent, coordinated effort to … prevent [government officials] from fulfilling their constitutional roles.'" (LaBrant Plaintiffs' Br 2-3); *cf. United States v Greathouse*, 26 F Cas 18 (CCND Cal 1863) (Field, J.) (insurrection or rebellion are no less than treason); accord, *e.g.*, 37 Cong Globe 2173 (1862) (Sen. Howard) (insurrection or rebellion "nothing more nor less than treason"). Given Plaintiffs' broad definitions, their position that a wide range of state officials

can independently enforce Section Three would court anarchy. Even opponents of former President Trump have foreseen the partisan escalation that this theory invites and condemned their theory as generating a "nightmare of uncertainty." See Lessig, *A Terrible Plan to Neutralize Trump Has Entranced the Legal World*, Slate (Sept 19, 2023), perma.cc/98J9-FFUU.

Here are just a few of the possible implications of leaving this decision to the States, keeping in mind Plaintiffs' broad definitions of the disqualifying terms:

- Vice President Harris, President Biden, and their staffs advocated for, marched with, and provided material support to rioters in the wake of George Floyd's death in 2020.[2] These rioters stormed the White House, injuring police officers and forcing the President and his family and staff to shelter in a bunker.[3] Over the course of several weeks, these rioters killed people, attacked and in some instances took over several government buildings, caused billions of dollars in property damage, and sought to establish alternative "governments" in the form of so-called "autonomous zones" across multiple U.S. cities.[4] If a state official believes that President Biden or Vice President Harris aided these efforts, he may eliminate President Biden and Vice President Harris from the ballot. And because these actions preceded the 2020 election, that would mean that the United States has not had a valid President since January 2021 and that all federal criminal convictions, regulations, and laws enacted since then are subject to legal challenge as "*ultra vires*." Baude & Paulsen, 172 U Pa L Rev at 29.

- After the Supreme Court heard an abortion case in 2020, Senator Chuck Schumer attempted to impede it from carrying out its lawful duty. He stood before the Court and threatened Justices by name: "I want to tell you Gorsuch. I want to tell you Kavanaugh. You have released the whirlwind and you will pay the price. You won't know what hit you if you go forward with

[2] *E.g.*, Marcus, *Meet the Rioting Criminals Kamala Harris Helped Bail Out of Jail*, The Federalist (Aug 31, 2020), perma.cc/9S6A-NBBG; Lange & Honeycutt, *Biden staff donate to group that pays bail in riot-torn Minneapolis*, Reuters (May 30, 2020), perma.cc/5FBJ-MTST; @JoeBiden, X (Aug 28, 2020), perma.cc/GSH6-W9EP.

[3] *E.g.*, Hoffman, *More than 60 Secret Service officers and agents were injured near the White House this weekend*, CNN (May 31, 2020), perma.cc/5H3J-Q2BD; Leonnig, *Protesters' breach of temporary fences near White House complex prompted Secret Service to move Trump to secure bunker*, Wash Post (June 3, 2020), perma.cc/E75G-XTJL.

[4] *E.g.*, Holcombe & Boyette, *Seattle police to remove concrete barriers around precinct that was temporarily vacated during George Floyd protests*, CNN (Apr 3, 2021), perma.cc/KMJ8-VU5U; *Retired St. Louis police captain killed during unrest sparked by George Floyd death*, CBS News (June 3, 2020), perma.cc/69RN-EYAM; McEvoy, *14 Days of Protests, 19 Dead*, Forbes (June 8, 2020), perma.cc/P4YA-MJ5W; Deese, *Vandalism, looting following Floyd death sparks at least $1B in damages nationwide: report*, The Hill (Sept 16, 2020), perma.cc/T2N4-KC67; Boyd, *Death Toll Rises To An Estimated 30 Victims Since 'Mostly Peaceful Protests' Began*, The Federalist (Aug 19, 2020), perma.cc/2V7V-NTFP.

these awful decisions."[5] Democrats continued this rhetoric as the Supreme Court decided *Dobbs*, and their supporters did turn violent. Many supporters illegally protested outside of Justices' homes to intimidate them and still continue to do so.[6] And at least one attempted to assassinate Justice Kavanaugh.[7] If Senator Schumer or his fellow Democrats engaged in conduct tantamount to an insurrection, then by Plaintiffs' rationale every judicial nominee voted on by them and every law passed by them since then may be invalidated on that basis.

- During the last Administration, many prominent Democrats publicly directed their supporters to confront Administration officials. As Democratic Congresswoman Maxine Waters said, "If you see anybody from that Cabinet in a restaurant, in a department store, at a gasoline station, you get out and you create a crowd and you push back on them."[8] Around the same time, many Democrat supporters did confront Administration officials.[9] Worst of all, a Democrat supporter attempted to commit a mass murder of Republicans when he attacked a Republican baseball practice in advance of the Congressional Baseball Game, shooting at several sitting Republican members and staff and seriously wounding Representative Steve Scalise.[10] On Plaintiffs' theory, state officials may disqualify these Democrats or nullify their acts if they determine them to constitute insurrection or rebellion, or giving aid or comfort to the enemies of the United States.

Needless to say, just like the events underlying Plaintiffs' theories, state officials and Americans in general are divided in how to view these events, often along partisan lines. But allowing state officials in their own judgment to remove the offenders from the ballot or nullify federal authority is not something a Reconstruction Congress would prescribe.

"Confidence in the integrity of our electoral processes is essential to the functioning of our participatory democracy." *Purcell v Gonzalez*, 549 US 1, 4 (2006). Allowing political opponents to pick each other off ballots based on their normative differences would harm confidence in our electoral

[5] *E.g.*, Moreno, *Schumer warns Kavanaugh and Gorsuch they will 'pay the price'*, The Hill (Mar 4, 2020), perma.cc/TX9J-BUX8.
[6] *E.g.*, Blake, *Yes, experts say protests at SCOTUS justices' homes appear to be illegal*, Wash Post (May 11, 2022), perma.cc/BEM7-FCU2.
[7] *E.g.*, Honderich, *US man charged with attempted murder of Justice Brett Kavanaugh*, BBC (June 9, 2022), perma.cc/A7T9-XB7P.
[8] *E.g.*, Warmbrodt, *Waters scares Democrats with call for all-out war on Trump*, Politico (June 25, 2018), perma.cc/E7XR-JAV4; Boyd, *10 Times Democrats Urged Violence Against Trump and His Supporters*, The Federalist (Jan 8, 2021), perma.cc/CQ37-F29E.
[9] *E.g.*, Lurie, *Trump Officials Can No Longer Eat Out in Peace*, Mother Jones (June 23, 2018), perma.cc/JJL3-YP3D.
[10] *E.g.*, Keeley, *Rep. Steve Scalise, Shot by Sanders Supporter, Replies to Request for Evidence of 'Bernie Bros' Being Bad: 'I Can Think of an Example'*, Newsweek (Feb 20, 2020), perma.cc/3D4C-6SPX.

processes. See also Benson, *supra* (explaining "the very real value of ensuring that, in our democracy, voters and political parties have the choice and freedom to vote for or nominate their preferred candidate,'" and that "ballot access" does not become a "dangerously convenient tool of partisan politics").

C. The U.S. Supreme Court has cautioned against state control over similar election issues even outside the Reconstruction context.

Even outside the Reconstruction context, the United States Supreme Court has long warned in broad terms against state control over national election qualifications. "In light of the Framers' evident concern that States would try to undermine the National Government, they could not have intended States to have the power to set qualifications." *Thornton*, 514 US at 810. States cannot even enforce *state* law to disqualify someone from federal office; those qualifications are set and enforced by the federal government, usually Congress. *Id.* at 810-811; see also *Chiafalo* 140 S Ct at 2324 n 4 ("if a State adopts a condition on its appointments that effectively imposes new requirements on presidential candidates, the condition may conflict with the Presidential Qualifications Clause"). Indeed, in the aftermath of the Civil War, Congress itself judged whether candidates for federal office were disqualified under *state* law, just like they did for federal law, including Section Three. *See Hinds'* 471.

The notion of state control over who appears on ballots for federal office would have been unfamiliar to the ratifiers of the Fourteenth Amendment. At the time, state and local governments did not control who was on the ballot at all. *See John Doe No 1 v Reed*, 561 US 186, 226 (2010) (Scalia, J., concurring in the judgment). Parties distributed ballots; state and local governments accepted and counted them. *Id.* It would have shocked the ratifiers to hear an argument that Section Three itself empowers state and local officials to intervene at the ballot stage to enforce their views of federal qualifications.

D. Congress has not authorized pre-election enforcement of Section Three in state courts.

The Fourteenth Amendment contemplates a mechanism by which Congress can authorize others to enforce Section Three, but Congress has not done so. Section Five of the Fourteenth Amendment gives Congress "the power to enforce, by appropriate legislation, the provisions of this article," including Section Three. US Const, amend XIV, sec 3. That Congress has not exercised that power to authorize private plaintiffs to sue or state officials to adjudicate Section Three means that this determination still belongs exclusively to Congress.

The drafters of Section Three understood that it would require implementing legislation. "If this amendment prevails," its principal proponent explained, "[i]t *will not execute itself*." 39 Cong Globe 2544 (1866) (Rep Stevens) (emphasis added). Even when Congress wanted Section Three enforced with respect to *state* offices, it believed that implementing legislation was required. That's why it authorized federal law enforcement actions to remove such officers. See Act of May 31, 1870 (First Ku Klux Klan Act), ch 114, secs 14, 15, 16 Stat 140, 143.

Sure enough, immediately after Section Three was ratified, Chief Justice Chase dismissed a Section Three lawsuit because "legislation by Congress is necessary to give effect to" Section Three. *In re Griffin*, 11 F Cas 7, 26 (CCD Va 1869). He said that the removal of disqualified officeholders "can only be provided for by [C]ongress." *Id.* That remains the law today. See Blackman & Tillman, *Sweeping and Forcing the President into Section 3*, 28 Tex Rev L & Pol (forthcoming 2024), perma.cc/2XLZ-X2RF (explaining *In re Griffin* at length); *Cale v City of Covington*, 586 F2d 311, 316 (CA 4, 1978) (explaining that *Griffin* held "that the third section of the Fourteenth Amendment, concerning disqualifications to hold office, was not self-executing absent congressional action" and concluding "that the Congress and Supreme Court of the time were in agreement that affirmative relief under the [Fourteenth] [A]mendment should come from Congress").

This Court is therefore not the forum to entertain the merits of Section Three qualification.

II. Primary ballot cleansing violates National Republican Amici's First Amendment rights.

Enforcing Section Three at the *primary* stage would also violate the First Amendment rights of National Republican Amici and their members and supporters. "Under our political system, a basic function of a political party is to select the candidates for public office to be offered to the voters at general elections." *Kusper v Pontikes*, 414 US 51, 58 (1973). National Republican Amici help carry out this function, including in the upcoming presidential primary in Michigan.

A party's right to select candidates is protected by the First Amendment. "[T]he processes by which political parties select their nominees" are subject to the "limits imposed by the Constitution." *California Democratic Party v Jones*, 530 US 567, 572-573 (2000). "It is well settled that partisan political organizations enjoy freedom of association protected by the First and Fourteenth Amendments." *Eu v San Francisco Co Democratic Cent Committee*, 489 US 214, 224 (1989). " 'The ability of the members of the Republican Party to select their own candidate . . . unquestionably implicates an associational freedom.' " *Jones*, 530 US at 575 (ellipsis in original). It is "central to the exercise of the right of association." *Tashjian v Republican Party of Connecticut*, 479 US 208, 214 (1986)

When a State intrudes "upon the selection of the party's nominee," it violates that First Amendment right. *Jones*, 530 US at 577 n 7; accord *Cousins v Wigoda*, 419 US 477, 487-488 (1975). Among other things, that means "ballot access must be genuinely open to all, subject to reasonable requirements" such as objective popular-support metrics. *Lubin v Panish*, 415 US 709, 719 (1974). States must always leave it up to a party and its members "to select a 'standard bearer who best represents the party's ideologies and preferences.' " *Eu*, 489 US at 224; see also *Republican Party of Connecticut*, 479 US at 216 (primary is "the crucial juncture at which the appeal to common principles may be translated into concerted action, and hence to political power in the community").

Removing former President Trump from the ballot violates this right. It denies ballot access to one of the Party's potential candidates. It ruptures the "process[] by which [Republicans] select

their nominees" and denies them their " 'ability … to select their own candidate.' " *Jones*, 530 US at 572, 575. And it unconstitutionally puts in the hands of the State rather than the party the right to select a " 'standard bearer who best represents the party's ideologies and preferences.' " *Eu*, 489 US at 224. If Republicans cannot nominate the candidate of their choice, then the primary system will no longer be theirs.

Nor can Section Three supersede this First Amendment right. "[T]here can be no justification for needlessly rendering provisions in conflict if they can be interpreted harmoniously." Garner & Scalia, *Reading Law: The Interpretation of Legal Texts* 180 (2012). Since Section Three's phrase "hold office" and the First Amendment right of political parties can easily be interpreted harmoniously by not applying Section Three at the primary stage, that harmonious interpretation must prevail. See Cooley, *A Treatise on the Constitutional Limitations Which Rest the Legislative Power of the States of the American Union* 58 (1868) ("one part is not to be allowed to defeat another, if by any reasonable construction the two can be made to stand together"); *W Virginia Univ Hosps, Inc. v. Casey*, 499 US 83, 101 (1991) ("[I]t is our role to make sense rather than nonsense out of the corpus juris.").

Even if they did conflict, the conflict would be governed by the general-specific canon and the First Amendment would win. Even "when conflicting provisions simply cannot be reconciled," "the specific provision is treated as an exception to the general rule." Garner & Scalia, *Reading Law*, at 183. The First Amendment carves out one specific protected right—of political parties to select their own candidates at the primary stage—from Plaintiffs' vast construction of Section Three's prohibitions. That specific protection must prevail.

III. Section Three does not apply to former Presidents.

Section Three applies only to people who have previously taken the Article VI Oath to support the Constitution. A prerequisite to Section Three disqualification is "an oath, as a member of Congress, or as an officer of the United States, or as a member of any State legislature, or as an

executive or judicial officer of any State, to support the Constitution of the United States." US Const, amend XIV, sec 3. But that is not the oath that Presidents take. They take the Article II oath to "preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution." US Const art II. And they are not and never have been considered "executive … Officers … of the United States" under the Article VI Oath Clause. This exclusion of the presidency makes sense because the drafters had no former Presidents on their minds.

A. Presidents do not take an oath "to support" the Constitution.

Everyone who drafted Section Three was familiar with the Article VI Oath Clause, which was part of the original Constitution. Article VI requires an "Oath" of "Senators and Representatives," "Members of the several State Legislatures," and "all executive and judicial Officers, both of the United States and of the several States." US Const art VI. They must take an oath to "support this Constitution." *Id.*; see also *Illinois v Krull*, 480 US 340, 351 (1987). Congress has always required this oath by law. See 5 USC 3331 (to "support" the Constitution).

Section Three applies to officers who took the Article VI oath. Section Three refers to an "oath." US Const, amend XIV, sec 3. It refers to the same exact categories of people who take that oath: "a member of Congress," "a member of any State legislature," "an officer of the United States," or "an executive or judicial officer of any State." *Id.* And it refers to not just any oath, but the oath to "support the Constitution." *Id.* The drafters of Section Three were referring to the same oath "to support" the Constitution everybody already knew. See Paschal, *The Constitution of the United States Defined and Carefully Annotated*, at xxxviii (Article VI oath and Section Three apply to "precisely the same class of officers"). When " 'a word [or phrase] is obviously transplanted from another legal source,' " it " 'brings the old soil with it.' " *Hall v Hall*, 138 S Ct 1118, 1128 (2018). Congress's decision to refer to the Article VI oath in Section Three makes sense because that was the relevant oath for every past officeholder possibly within Congress's contemplation.

But Presidents have never taken the Article VI oath. The statute carrying into effect the Article VI Oath Clause confirms that it applies to a wide range of government officials "*except the President*." 5 USC 3331 (emphasis added). There is "no historical evidence that the President has ever taken a separate oath pursuant to the Article VI Oath or Affirmation Clause." Tillman & Blackman, *Offices and Officers of the Constitution Part III: The Appointments, Impeachment, Commissions, and Oath or Affirmation* Clauses, 62 S Tex L Rev 349, 423 (2023).

Presidents take a different oath. Their oath is prescribed by Article II. See US Const art II, sec 1; see also *Am Commc'ns Ass'n, CIO v Douds*, 339 US 382, 415 (1950) ("For the President, a specific oath was set forth in the Constitution itself. Art. II, §1."). In that oath, they do not swear to "support" the Constitution, as Section Three requires. They swear to "preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution." See US Const art II, sec 1 ("I do solemnly swear (or affirm) that I will faithfully execute the office of President of the United States, and will to the best of my ability, preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States"). Former President Trump has never taken the Article VI oath "to support" the Constitution as used in Section Three, but only the Article II oath. He therefore falls outside the coverage of Section Three.

B. The President is not an "officer of the United States" because that phrase never includes the President in the Constitution.

The presidency is also not among those positions whose past oath would subject them to Section Three. Section Three applies only to a "member of Congress," "officer of the United States," "member of any State legislature," or "executive or judicial officer of any State." US Const, amend XIV, sec 3. Plaintiffs contend that the President must be an "officer of the United States." (LaBrant Plaintiffs' Br 5.) He is not. That is why he is not required to take the Article VI Oath, even though it applies to "all executive … Officers … of the United States." US Const art VI. And it is consistent with the best authorities on whether the phrase "officer of the United States" includes the President.

When Section Three was ratified, it was a matter of public knowledge that the President was not an "officer of the United States" for constitutional purposes. In his famous *Commentaries*, Joseph Story wrote that because the Constitution's Impeachment Clause lists the President, Vice President, "and *all civil officers* (not all *other* civil officers)," that means that the President and Vice President were "contradistinguished from, rather than ... included in the description of, civil officers of the United States." 2 Joseph Story, *Commentaries on the Constitution of the United States* 260 (1833).

Less than a decade after the Fourteenth Amendment's ratification, at least two Senators said the same thing. Senator Newton Booth said that "the President is not an officer of the United States." *Congressional Record Containing the Proceedings of the Senate Sitting for the Trial of William W Belknap* 145 (1876). Senator Boutwell said that "according to the Constitution, as well as upon the judgment of eminent commentators, the President and Vice-President are not civil officers." *Id.* at 130. Around the same time, a treatise confirmed what Justice Story wrote: "[i]t is obvious that ... the President is not regarded as 'an officer of, or under, the United States.' " Mcknight, *The Electoral System of the United States* 346 (1878).

In the twentieth century, two future Supreme Court Justices came to similar conclusions. Future-Justice Scalia wrote that "when the word 'officer' is used in the Constitution, it invariably refers to someone *other than* the President or Vice President." *Memorandum from Antonin Scalia to Honorable Kenneth A. Lazarus, Re: Applicability of 3 C.F.R. Part 100*, OLC, at 2 (Dec 19, 1974), perma.cc/GQA4-PJNN. And future-Chief Justice Rehnquist wrote that "statutes which refer to 'officers' or 'officials' of the United States are construed not to include the President unless there is a specific indication that Congress intended to cover the Chief Executive." *Memorandum from William H. Rehnquist to the Honorable Egil Krogh, Re: Closing of Government Offices*, OLC, at 3 (Apr 1, 1969), perma.cc/P229-BAKL. Recently, one scholar who was initially hopeful about Section Three disqualification concluded that it would not work because the President is not an "officer of the United States." See Calabresi, *Donald Trump Should*

be on the Ballot and Should Lose, Volokh Conspiracy (Sept 16, 2023), perma.cc/LP5Y-MJ97 ("In my foolish youth, I once argued mistakenly in print that the President is an 'Officer of the United States.' Thirty-three years of academic research and writing on the presidency has persuaded me that the words 'officer of the United States' are a legal term of art, which does not apply to the President." (citation omitted)).

The Constitution refers to the Presidency as an "office," *e.g.*, US Const art II, but the phrase "officer of the United States"—the one used in Section Three—never encompasses the President. Each of the four other constitutional uses of that phrase confirm as much:

- *Article VI Oath Clause.* Article VI requires an oath of "*all executive* and judicial *Officers* … *of the United States*." US Const art VI. No President has ever taken an Article VI Oath. *See* Tillman & Blackman, *supra*, at 423. Indeed, the statute carrying into effect the Article VI Oath Clause confirms that it applies to a wide range of government officials "*except the President*." 5 USC 3331 (emphasis added).

- *Commissions Clause.* Article II assigns to the President the duty to "commission *all* the *officers of the United States*." US Const art II, sec 3 (emphases added). But "[t]he President has never commissioned himself." Tillman & Blackman, 62 S Tex L Rev at 412. Nor have Presidents received commissions from their predecessors. See *id.* That unbroken practice would be unconstitutional if "all the officers of the United States" included the President.

- *Appointments Clause.* Article II assigns to the President the power to "appoint Ambassadors, other public Ministers and Consuls, Judges of the supreme Court, and *all* other *Officers of the United States*, whose Appointments are not herein otherwise provided for, and which shall be established by Law." US Const art II, sec 2 (emphases added). Again, since the President does not appoint himself, the phrase "all other Officers of the United States" does not include him. And his "appointmen[t]" is not otherwise provided for because the President is not "appoint[ed]" at all—he is elected. See US Const, amend XII; *id.* art II.

- *Impeachments Clause.* Last, Article II describes the impeachment process for the "President, Vice President, and *all* civil *officers of the United States*," US Const art II, sec 4. (emphasis added). The first two items would be superfluous if "all" of the "officers of the United States" included the President. But see Garner & Scalia, *Reading Law*, at 174 ("If possible, every word ... is to be given effect."). And because the last category does not contain the word "other," it is not a catch-all clause that also comprehends the first two categories, but rather a distinct third category. Again, that's because the President is *never* a constitutional "officer of the United States."

Drafting history confirms what the text suggests. When the Impeachments Clause was drafted, it initially referred to the President, Vice President, and "*other* civil officers of the U.S." 2 *The Records of*

the Federal Convention of 1787, at 545, 552 (Farrand ed, 1911). But upon further deliberation, the drafters changed the Impeachments Clause to remove the word "other." *Id.* at 600. That change makes no sense if the President is an "officer of the United States."

Precedent also supports this conclusion. The President is commonly referred to as a "department" or "branch," not as an "Officer of the United States." See, *e.g.*, *State of Mississippi v Johnson*, 71 US 475, 500 (1866) ("the President is the executive department"); *Trump v Mazars USA, LLP*, 140 S Ct 2019, 2034 (2020) ("The President is the only person who alone composes a branch of government."). Supreme Court precedent has long assumed that the President is not an "Officer of the United States." See, *e.g.*, *Free Enter Fund v PCAOB*, 561 US 477, 497-498 (2010) ("The people do not vote for the 'Officers of the United States.'"); accord *United States v Mouat*, 124 US 303, 307 (1888) ("Unless a person in the service of the government, therefore, holds his place by virtue of an appointment by the president, or of one of the courts of justice or heads of departments authorized by law to make such an appointment, he is not, strictly speaking, an officer of the United States."); *Seila Law LLC v CFPB*, 140 S Ct 2183, 2199 (2020) ("Article II distinguishes between two kinds of officers—principal officers (who must be *appointed by* the President with the advice and consent of the Senate) and inferior officers (whose *appointment* Congress may vest in the President, courts, or heads of Departments)." (emphases added)).

It is unsurprising that Section Three does not reach beyond those who took the Article VI oath. First, at the time, *all* former Presidents had previously taken the Article VI oath as state or federal officeholders before their elections, so reaching further would have been unnecessary. Second, there were no former Presidents on the drafters' minds at all anyway. Only one former President had joined the Confederacy, but he was dead. See *John Tyler*, White House Historical Ass'n, perma.cc/23RJ-AWWJ.

IV. Section Three does not cover holding the presidency.

Even if former President Trump had taken the Article VI Oath, Section Three does not disqualify anyone from becoming *President*. By its terms, Section Three disqualifies people only from holding the following positions: "Senator or Representative in Congress," "elector of President and Vice-President," or "any office, civil or military, under the United States, or under any State." US Const, amend XIV, sec 3.

The first draft of what became Section Three provided that nobody could "hold the office of President or Vice President of the United States, Senator or Representative in the national Congress, or any office now held under appointment from the President of the United States, and requiring the confirmation of the Senate.…" 39 Cong Globe 919 (1866). Congress then eliminated "the office of President or vice president of the United States" and enacted Section Three without it. See US Const, amend XIV, sec 3. Of course, courts "presume differences in language like this convey differences in meaning." *Henson v Santander Consumer USA Inc.*, 582 US 79, 86 (2017); see also *Thornton*, 514 US at 810 n 20 (deciding election-qualifications questions based in part on "[t]he Framers' decision to reject a proposal allowing for States to recall their own representatives"). It is not for this Court to second-guess the drafters' decision.

If the drafters wanted to use Section Three to overturn presidential elections, it is unlikely that they would have been so subtle. Although the drafters identified specifically "member[s] of Congress," "member[s] of any State legislature," and even "*elector[s]* of President and Vice-President," Plaintiffs contend that they also covered duly elected Presidents—the most important position in America—in the same catch-all class as entry-level bureaucrats. It is more likely that "officer under the United States" referred only to subordinate offices and that the highest offices were identified by name. This follows from the "commonsense principle[] of communication" that drafters communicate major

decisions—like whether they are proposing to disqualify duly elected Presidents—with clarity. *Biden v Nebraska*, 143 S Ct 2355, 2380 (2023) (Barrett, J., concurring).

This understanding also makes sense in historical context. "[T]he President and the Vice President of the United States are the only elected officials who represent all the voters in the Nation." *Anderson v Celebrezze*, 460 US 780, 795 (1983). The drafters of the Fourteenth Amendment were not trying to subvert the national will, but a regional will. Their concerns were with things like "prevent[ing] the intrusion of arch traitor Jefferson Davis into the *Senate*." 39 Cong Globe 2537 (1866). Section *Two*, which restricted representatives from the former Confederate States, ensured that no Confederate would soon become President as a matter of math, and nobody mentioned such a concern in the ratification debates. Lash, *The Meaning and Ambiguity of Section Three of the Fourteenth Amendment* 29 (last updated Oct. 28, 2023), perma.cc/A2HW-7K48.

V. Congress stayed Section Three.

Section Three's final clause allows Congress to eliminate its force. Because it was tailored for a unique crisis, Section Three's last clause provides that "Congress may by a vote of two-thirds of each House, remove such disability." US Const, amend XIV, sec 3.

Congress has eliminated the disability of Section Three in full. In 1872, it enacted a law, with two-thirds support in both Houses, that provided blanket removal of any disqualifications under Section Three:

> [A]ll political disabilities imposed by the third section of the fourteenth article of amendments of the Constitution of the United States are hereby removed from all persons whomsoever, except Senators and Representatives of the thirty-sixth and thirty-seventh Congresses, officers in the judicial, military, and naval service of the United States, heads of departments, and foreign ministers of the United States.

Act of May 22, 1872, ch 193, 17 Stat 142. Because former President Trump is among "all persons whomsoever," and does not fit into any of the exceptions, this statute therefore eliminates "all political disabilities imposed by [Section Three]" as to him.

The 1872 statute completed the plan for what was once going to be guaranteed in Section Three's actual text. The Joint Committee on Reconstruction had originally proposed a draft of Section Three that automatically terminated on "the 4th day of July, in the year 1870." See *Journal of the Joint Committee of Fifteen on Reconstruction* 118 (1914); see also 39 Cong Globe 2460 (1866).

Congress decided, in enacting this 1872 statute, that Section Three was an unusual remedy for an unusual time. It mercifully put Section Three to rest. In fact, the previous statutes authorizing Section Three enforcement were formally removed in 1948 in a codification that all agreed made no substantive changes to the law—because there was nothing left to enforce going forward. See Act of June 25, 1948, ch 646, sec 39, 62 Stat 869, 993; see also Act of June 25, 1948, 62 Stat 683; Barron, *The Judicial Code*, 8 FRD 439 (1949). When political opponents now resurrect Section Three—in state courts, rather than in Congress—to try to remove a candidate from the ballot based on events over which Americans are divided, perhaps it is easy to see why Congress put this provision to rest. Today's decisionmakers must respect that decision.

* * *

Finally, if this Court has any doubt concerning Section Three's application, it should resolve such doubt against Plaintiffs. As the Attorney General wrote in 1867, "[t]hose who are expressly brought within its operation [of Section Three] cannot be saved from its operation." But "[w]here, from the generality of terms of description, or for any other reason, a reasonable doubt arises, that doubt is to be resolved against the operation of the law." The Reconstruction Acts, 12 Op Att'y Gen 141, 160 (1867) (then-Attorney General Stansbury).

CONCLUSION

This Court should rule against Plaintiffs' requests to alter the 2024 primary and general election ballots in Michigan.

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Patrick N. Strawbridge*
CONSOVOY MCCARTHY PLLC
Ten Post Office Square
8th Floor South PMB #706
Boston, MA 02109
(617) 227-0548
patrick@consovoymccarthy.com

Gilbert C. Dickey*
Jeffrey S. Hetzel*
CONSOVOY MCCARTHY PLLC
1600 Wilson Blvd., Ste. 700
Arlington, VA 22209
703-243-9423
*pro hac vice application forthcoming

/s/ Matthew T. Nelson
Matthew T. Nelson (P64768)
Troy M. Cumings (P63278)
WARNER NORCROSS + JUDD LLP
150 Ottawa Avenue, N.W., Suite 1500
Grand Rapids, MI 49508
(616) 752-2000
mnelson@wnj.com
tcumings@wnj.com

Counsel for Amici Republican National Committee, National Republican Senatorial Committee, and National Republican Congressional Committee