Nos. 22-23 and 22-331

In The
Supreme Court of the United States

JEAN FRANCOIS PUGIN,
Petitioner,

v.

MERRICK B. GARLAND, Attorney General,
Respondent.

MERRICK B. GARLAND, Attorney General,
Petitioner,

v.

FERNANDO CORDERO-GARCIA,
Respondent.

On Writs of Certiorari To the United States Courts of Appeals For the Fourth and Ninth Circuits

BRIEF AMICUS CURIAE OF PACIFIC LEGAL FOUNDATION IN SUPPORT OF PETITIONER PUGIN AND RESPONDENT CORDERO-GARCIA

OLIVER J. DUNFORD
Pacific Legal Foundation
4440 PGA Blvd., Ste. 307
Palm Beach Gardens
FL 33410
916.503.9060
ODunford@pacificlegal.org

CALEB J. KRUCKENBERG
Counsel of Record
Pacific Legal Foundation
3100 Clarendon Blvd.
Suite 1000
Arlington, VA 22201
202.888.6881
CKruckenberg@pacificlegal.org

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IDENTITY AND INTEREST OF AMICUS CURIAE[1]

Founded in 1973, Pacific Legal Foundation is a nonprofit, tax-exempt, California corporation established for the purpose of litigating matters affecting the public interest. PLF provides a voice in the courts for Americans who believe in limited constitutional government, private property rights, and individual freedom.

PLF is the most experienced public-interest legal organization defending the constitutional principle of separation of powers in the arena of administrative law. PLF's attorneys have participated as lead counsel or counsel for amici in several cases involving the role of the Judicial Branch as an independent check on the Executive and Legislative branches under the Constitution's Separation of Powers. *See, e.g.*, *Lucia v. SEC*, 138 S.Ct. 2044 (2018) (SEC administrative-law judge is "officer of the United States" under the Appointments Clause); *U.S. Army Corps of Eng'rs v. Hawkes Co., Inc.*, 578 U.S. 590 (2016) (judicial review of agency interpretation of Clean Water Act); *Sackett v. EPA*, 566 U.S. 120 (2012) (same); *Rapanos v. United States*, 547 U.S. 715 (2006) (agency regulations defining "waters of the United States").

This case implicates significant questions about administrative overreach and judicial abdication:

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[1] Pursuant to Rule 37.6, Amicus Curiae affirms that no counsel for any party authored this brief in whole or in part, and no counsel or party made a monetary contribution intended to fund the preparation or submission of this brief. No person other than Amicus Curiae, its members, or its counsel made a monetary contribution to its preparation or submission.

whether an administrative agency may claim the judicial power to say what the law is; whether, and to what extent, the quasi-judicial rulings of an administrative agency warrant deference; and, finally, whether courts are obligated to reject deference when an administrative interpretation trumps the rule of lenity, thereby authorizing the permanent removal of noncitizens. PLF offers a discussion of the relevant constitutional principles and the dire consequences of ignoring them, and urges this Court to restore the rule of lenity, and not administrative deference, to its proper place.

SUMMARY OF ARGUMENT

In the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), Congress established harsh consequences for noncitizens convicted of certain criminal offenses. Those who have committed an offense "relating to . . . the obstruction of justice" face permanent banishment from this country. *See* 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(43)(S). That is true even if they have become lawful permanent residents, had children who are citizens of the United States, and worked and lived as every other American for years. How Courts go about resolving the statutory question of which crimes qualify for these harsh consequences, therefore, matters greatly for noncitizens, their families, and indeed every person in this country who values fair and predictable outcomes in our immigration system.

This Court is faced with two different views of what that statutory provision means, and its answer to the question presented will likely turn on its deference to the Department of Justice's own reading of the law. The Ninth Circuit, reading the statute on

its own, and without deferring to the Board of Immigration Appeals (BIA), held that obstruction of justice offenses must have "a nexus to an ongoing or pending proceeding." *Valenzuela Gallardo v. Barr*, 968 F.3d 1053, 1066 (9th Cir. 2020). The Fourth Circuit, however, deferred to the BIA's reading of the statute—even though the Board's reading was not the most obvious or natural understanding of Congress' words, the BIA is a quasi-judicial body employed by the very prosecutor initiating removal proceedings, and the rule of lenity compels resolution of ambiguity in the challenger's favor. *See Pugin v. Garland*, 19 F.4th 437, 449 (4th Cir. 2021). Thus, the Fourth Circuit accepted the BIA's claim that obstruction of justice requires only obstruction of a "reasonably foreseeable" proceeding. *Id.*

This Court should reject a methodology that results in removal of a noncitizen purely out of deference to the Department of Justice. Such a methodology is at odds with the separate roles occupied by the judiciary, Congress, and the Executive Branch. Deference to the BIA is simply improper.

First, deference is improper here because none of the central premises of *Chevron* deference apply to the inherently legal decisions made by the BIA. *See Chevron U.S.A., Inc. v. Nat. Res. Def. Council, Inc.*, 467 U.S. 837 (1984). The BIA lacks appropriate expertise, does not engage in accountable or predictable policymaking, and, rather than promoting uniformity, sows unpredictability into our immigration laws.

Second, deference to the enforcement agency's punitive reading of the INA runs afoul of the

Constitution's baseline presumption of lenity. To respect the constitutional imperatives of fair notice, the separation of powers, and our fundamental preference for liberty, the rule of lenity compels that the "drastic measure" of removal arises only when the will of Congress is clear, based on "the narrowest of several possible meanings of the words used." *See Fong Haw Tan v. Phelan*, 333 U.S. 6, 10 (1948). Accordingly, when a court finds ambiguity in cases like this, it must apply the rule of lenity—not deference—to an administrative interpretation.

This Court is faced with a stark choice. It can defer to the BIA, as the Executive Branch now urges in its briefing, or it can do what courts should—interpret the law on its own. By choosing the latter route, this Court not only serves its constitutional role under Article III, but it also safeguards due process and the separation of powers by rejecting the BIA's textually dubious and overly punitive analysis.

ARGUMENT

I. Because *Chevron*'s Premises Are Absent, Routine Deference to the BIA Is Precluded.

In *INS v. Aguirre-Aguirre*, this Court concluded "that principles of *Chevron* deference are applicable to th[e] statutory scheme" set out in the INA. 526 U.S. 415, 424 (1999). In the Court's view, the Executive Branch may "exercise especially sensitive political functions that implicate questions of foreign relations," and, therefore, the "judiciary is not well positioned to shoulder primary responsibility for assessing the likelihood and importance of such diplomatic repercussions" that might arise from

interpretation of the INA. *Id.* at 424–25 (citation omitted). Thus, in that case, the Court concluded that deference even to the BIA's interpretation of law was warranted. *See id.*

But there are good reasons to question whether deference to the BIA is *ever* appropriate, and this Court should at least clarify that deference is hardly automatic. Indeed, deference to the BIA's statutory interpretation serves none of the core premises of *Chevron* itself, and this Court's most recent decisions cast doubt on the continued viability of *Aguirre-Aguirre*'s holding.

When an agency demands deference, a court should first determine whether "*Chevron*'s essential premises" are present. *Epic Sys. Corp. v. Lewis*, 138 S.Ct. 1612, 1629 (2018). If one or more of these premises are missing, no deference may be afforded. Here, when deference to the BIA is sought, all of *Chevron*'s premises are "simply missing." *Id.* Indeed, the "case against *Chevron* deference in administrative adjudication has perhaps its greatest force when it comes to immigration adjudication," because "the theoretical foundations for *Chevron* deference crumble in this context." Shoba Sivaprasad Wadhia & Christopher J. Walker, *The Case Against* Chevron *Deference in Immigration Adjudication*, 70 Duke L.J. 1197, 1201 (2021).

A. The BIA lacks the expertise relevant here—legal interpretation.

First, while agency expertise is considered one of the bedrock rationales for *Chevron* deference, the BIA has a demonstrable *lack* of expertise in interpreting

Congressionally enacted laws. As the *Chevron* Court said, when Congress has left a statutory ambiguity, it makes sense to infer that it "consciously desired the [agency] to strike the balance at this level, thinking that those with great expertise and charged with responsibility for administering the provision would be in a better position to do so." 467 U.S. at 865.

But the BIA is ultimately a quasi-judicial body, and the "expertise required to interpret the INA . . . does not require familiarity with technical or scientific information, nor with the workings of an industry, nor even, for the most part, with the mechanics of immigration enforcement." Maureen A. Sweeney, *Enforcing/Protection: The Danger of* Chevron *in Refugee Act Cases*, 71 Admin. L. Rev. 127, 174 (2019). Legal interpretation "demands expertise in legal analysis and the application of law to facts—precisely the sort of expertise that federal courts have." *Id.* at 175. Indeed, as in this case, the interpretive questions decided by the BIA often involve the scope of local criminal law, which is far *outside* the BIA's competence.

In contrast, when this Court did defer to the BIA's interpretation, it did so because of the Executive Branch's expertise concerning "especially sensitive political functions that implicate questions of foreign relations." *Aguirre-Aguirre*, 526 U.S. at 425 (citation omitted). There, the Court considered whether to "deem certain violent offenses committed in another country as political in nature, and to allow the perpetrators to remain in the United States, [which] may affect our relations with that country or its neighbors." *Id.* And while foreign-relations expertise

might have been dispositive in the narrow question before this Court in *Aguirre-Aguirre*, these interests rarely arise. The "vast majority of immigration cases require expertise, not in foreign affairs, but rather in the legal interpretation of a complex statutory and regulatory scheme." Sweeney, 71 Admin. L. Rev. at 175. In ordinary cases like this one, which implicate only whether a noncitizen has committed a domestic offense triggering removal, the sole question involves a statutory inquiry about *Congressional* intent.

Moreover, even if the BIA had relevant expertise here, its demand for deference must still be scrutinized. Accordingly, to decide whether deference is appropriate, courts must consider how an agency goes about making its decision. The "deference owed to an expert tribunal cannot be allowed to slip into a judicial inertia which results in the unauthorized assumption by an agency of major policy decisions properly made by Congress." *Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco & Firearms v. Fed. Lab. Rels. Auth.*, 464 U.S. 89, 97 (1983) (citation omitted). And lower courts have often recognized that *Chevron* deference to the BIA depends, in large part, on how thorough the Board's reasoning was. *See Arteaga-De Alvarez v. Holder*, 704 F.3d 730, 739 (9th Cir. 2012). When the BIA's decision "is not thoroughly reasoned" it is not entitled to *any* weight. *Id.* at 740.

The BIA's process reveals only cursory and superficial legal reasoning. Indeed, the BIA has, to put it lightly, been subject to stinging criticism for the shoddy quality of its analysis. *See, e.g.*, *INS v. Cardoza-Fonseca*, 480 U.S. 421, 452 (1987) (Blackmun, J., concurring) (bemoaning the BIA's

"years of seemingly purposeful blindness" in interpreting statutory provision that had been "entrusted to its care"); *Benslimane v. Gonzales*, 430 F.3d 828, 829–30 (7th Cir. 2005) (collecting cases where the "adjudication . . . at the administrative level has fallen below the minimum standards of legal justice" and noting that the "criticisms of the Board and of the immigration judges have frequently been severe"). The BIA's consistently deficient analysis is the predictable result of an organization overwhelmed by a staggering caseload, which is "further exacerbated by the fact that immigration judges and BIA members face pressure to meet quotas and follow guidelines set by the attorney general." Wadhia & Walker, 70 Duke L.J. at 1229–30.

B. The BIA has no responsibility for making policy decisions.

"Another justification the *Chevron* Court offered for deference is that 'policy choices' should be left to Executive Branch officials 'directly accountable to the people.'" *Epic Sys. Corp.*, 138 S.Ct. at 1630 (quoting *Chevron*, 467 U.S. at 865). But the BIA is not a policy arm of the Executive. "Rulemaking and adjudication are different, with perhaps the most important distinction being public notice and opportunity for comment." Kristin E. Hickman & Aaron L. Nielson, *Narrowing* Chevron*'s Domain*, 70 Duke L.J. 931, 965 (2021). "A process that requires an agency to interact with broad segments of society and explain why it has acted in view of concerns raised by the general public, all else being equal, typically should yield more legitimate outcomes." *Id.* at 967. But the BIA's decisions do not solicit public comments. Instead, the

BIA has jealously guarded most of them from public view. *See New York Legal Assistance Grp. v. Bd. of Immigr. Appeals*, 987 F.3d 207, 210–12 (2d Cir. 2021) (noting that "the balance of the BIA's [more than 30,000 yearly] unpublished decisions are not publicly available," and the agency contends that it need not release those decisions to the public).

C. The BIA's interpretations lack consistency and cause confusion.

Finally, deference is sometimes justified as a means of ensuring uniformity in application of the law. *See City of Arlington v. FCC*, 569 U.S. 290, 306–07 (2013) ("[A]d hoc judgment[s] regarding congressional intent" from courts "would render the binding effect of agency rules unpredictable and destroy the whole stabilizing purpose of *Chevron*."). But, as this case illustrates, BIA decisions are often destabilizing. *See Valenzuela Gallardo*, 968 F.3d at 1058 (recounting BIA's failed attempts to define "obstruction of justice"). The BIA even overrules circuit precedent concerning ambiguous statutes, creating turmoil in the law. *See, e.g.*, *Szonyi v. Barr*, 942 F.3d 874, 892 (9th Cir. 2019) (deferring to BIA ruling, even though it contradicted Ninth Circuit precedent). Other times the BIA reverses itself, or takes sides in a circuit split, which is obviously "not a sustainable way to administer uniform justice in the area of immigration." *Lugo v. Holder*, 783 F.3d 119, 121 (2d Cir. 2015) (citation omitted). Uniformity is simply not a feature of BIA adjudication.

II. This Court Should Clarify When BIA Decisions, Like the One Here, Are Not Entitled to Deference.

That deference may otherwise be permissible as a general matter hardly means a court *should* defer in a given case. *See, e.g.*, *Cardoza-Fonseca*, 480 U.S. at 448–49 (refusing to defer to the BIA). But the lower courts continue to reflexively defer to the BIA, even when it is demonstrably improper. This Court should at least clarify why deference in situations like this are improper.

First, as discussed above, the BIA has not exercised any special expertise in this case. At its root, the BIA has tried to interpret a statutory question concerning the scope of local criminal law. Accordingly, the Third Circuit rejected deference to the BIA's understanding of the phrase "obstruction of justice" because interpretation of that phrase was not "an obscure ambiguity or a matter committed to agency discretion," and was instead a question "very much a part of t[he] Court's competence." *Denis v. Att'y Gen. of U.S.*, 633 F.3d 201, 209 (3d Cir. 2011) (citation omitted). The agency thus lacks *relevant* experience to warrant deference.

"An additional reason for rejecting the [BIA's] request for heightened deference to its position is the inconsistency of the positions the BIA has taken through the years." *Cardoza-Fonseca*, 480 U.S. at 446 n.30 & 447. Not only does inconsistency undercut the presumption that the agency applies expertise, it also torpedoes any pretense to political accountability. When "the Executive seems of two minds, . . . whatever argument might be mustered for deferring

to the Executive on grounds of political accountability, surely [] becomes a garble when the Executive speaks from both sides of its mouth, articulating no single position on which it might be held accountable." *Epic Sys. Corp.*, 138 S.Ct. at 1630.

The BIA's reasoning here is anything but consistent. According to the INA, a noncitizen is removable after conviction of an "aggravated felony" offense "relating to . . . obstruction of justice." 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(43)(S). But over the years the BIA has seesawed between interpretations that would either (1) treat offenses like Mr. Pugin's single misdemeanor offense (accessory after the fact to another person's felony, Va. Code § 18.2-19(ii)) as an aggravated felony under the INA or (2) exempt from the harsh consequences of that determination. Originally, the BIA concluded that aggravated felony offenses obstructed *ongoing* proceedings, an interpretation that would exempt both of the petitioners' convictions from the INA's reach. *See In re Espinoza-Gonzalez*, 22 I. & N. Dec. 889, 893 (BIA 1999). The Ninth Circuit accepted that interpretation as binding law. *See Trung Thanh Hoang v. Holder*, 641 F.3d 1157, 1164 (9th Cir. 2011).

Yet the BIA changed course and spent nearly 10 years trying to undo its previous interpretation. In 2012, the BIA attempted to overrule itself—and the Ninth Circuit—by interpreting the offense to require interference only with an abstract "process of justice." *In re Valenzuela Gallardo*, 25 I. & N. Dec. 838, 841 (BIA 2012). The Ninth Circuit subsequently *rejected* that interpretation as being so vague as to be likely unconstitutional. *Valenzuela Gallardo v. Lynch*, 818

F.3d 808, 819 (9th Cir. 2016). So the BIA tried again, saying the interference need only affect a "reasonably foreseeable" proceeding. *In re Valenzuela Gallardo*, 27 I. & N. Dec. 449, 460 (BIA 2018). The Ninth Circuit *again* rejected the interpretation, this time as a matter of plain statutory interpretation. *See Valenzuela Gallardo*, 968 F.3d at 1069. Yet it is the BIA's latter interpretation—which the Ninth Circuit found unreasonable, even under a *Chevron* analysis—that the Fourth Circuit adopted here. *See Pugin*, 19 F.4th at 450. The only consistent line here seems to be the BIA's own waffling.

To round things out, no uniformity interests can justify deference. The BIA's effort in *Valenzuela Gallardo* has created profound confusion and inconsistency across the country. While the BIA failed *twice* to apply its definition in the Ninth Circuit against Mr. Valenzuela Gallardo himself, its decision nevertheless bound Mr. Pugin in the Fourth Circuit. Thus, similarly situated noncitizens face drastically different outcomes depending on where removal proceedings are initiated. This Court should not allow reflexive deference to the BIA to cause such confusion and uncertainty.

III. This Court Must Restore the Primacy of the Rule of Lenity in Agency Adjudication.

Even if the law at issue is ambiguous, this Court must apply the constitutionally derived rule of lenity and not reflexive deference to the BIA's interpretation. But the circuit courts seem to feel bound to do the opposite. In *Valenzuela Gallardo*, for instance, the Ninth Circuit recognized that "[d]eferring to the BIA's construction of a statute with

criminal applications raises serious constitutional concerns[,]" yet it dodged the ultimate deference question. *See* 968 F.3d at 1059. Meanwhile, the Fourth Circuit breezed past the rule of lenity without hesitation. *See Pugin*, 19 F.4th at 442. This is part of a disturbing and unconstitutional trend across the country, where courts of appeals discard constitutional principles enshrined in the rule of lenity for the sake of expediency. This Court must restore the primacy of the rule of lenity in such contexts.

A. The Rule of Lenity Requires Any Doubts Be Resolved Against Removal.

"The 'rule of lenity' is a new name for an old idea—the notion that 'penal laws should be construed strictly.'" *Wooden v. United States*, 142 S.Ct. 1063, 1082 (2022) (Gorsuch, J., concurring, joined by Sotomayor, J.) (quoting *The Adventure*, 1 F.Cas. 202, 204 (No. 93) (CC Va. 1812) (Marshall, C. J.)). The rule is a tool of construction "perhaps not much less old than construction itself." *United States v. Wiltberger*, 18 U.S. (5 Wheat.) 76, 95 (1820). In simple terms, "lenity requires ambiguous criminal laws to be interpreted in favor of the defendants subjected to them." *United States v. Santos*, 553 U.S. 507, 514 (2008) (plurality op.). But it also applies in non-criminal settings. Indeed, "[h]istorically, lenity applied to all 'penal' laws—that is, laws inflicting any form of punishment, including ones we might now consider 'civil' forfeitures or fines." *Wooden*, 142 S.Ct. at 1086 n.5 (Gorsuch, J., concurring) (citing cases). "In fact, if the severity of the consequences counts when deciding the standard of review, shouldn't we also

take account of the fact that today's civil laws regularly impose penalties far more severe than those found in many criminal statutes?" *Sessions v. Dimaya*, 138 S.Ct. 1204, 1229 (2018) (Gorsuch, J., concurring).

It is no wonder then that this Court has long applied the rule of lenity in removal proceedings. *See Fong Haw Tan*, 333 U.S. at 10. Accordingly, a court must "resolve [] doubts in favor" of an alien facing removal and "will not assume that Congress meant to trench on his freedom beyond that which is required by the narrowest of several possible meanings of the words used." *Id.* This is "because deportation is a drastic measure and at times the equivalent of banishment of exile. It is the forfeiture for misconduct of a residence in this country. Such a forfeiture is a penalty." *Id*. (citation omitted); *accord Barber v. Gonzales*, 347 U.S. 637, 642–43 (1954) ("Although not penal in character, deportation statutes as a practical matter may inflict the equivalent of banishment or exile and should be strictly construed.") (citation omitted).

Of course, the rule of lenity applies most obviously when a statute has criminal consequences. *See Santos*, 553 U.S. at 514. And, as this Court unanimously recognized in *Leocal v. Ashcroft*, when a statute "has both criminal and noncriminal applications," "the rule of lenity applies." 543 U.S. 1, 12 n.8 (2004). This is "[b]ecause [a court] must interpret the statute consistently," regardless of "whether [it] encounter[s] its application in a criminal or noncriminal context." *Id.* "In other words, when deciding which of two plausible statutory constructions to adopt, a court must consider the

necessary consequences of its choice. If one of them would raise a multitude of constitutional problems, the other should prevail—whether or not those constitutional problems pertain to the particular litigant before the Court." *Clark v. Martinez*, 543 U.S. 371, 380–81 (2005).

Three "core values of the Republic" underlie the rule of lenity: (1) due process; (2) the separation of governmental powers; and (3) "our nation's strong preference for liberty." *United States v. Nasir*, 17 F.4th 459, 473 (3d Cir. 2021) (en banc) (Bibas, J., concurring). Due process requires that "a fair warning should be given to the world in language that the common world will understand, of what the law intends to do if a certain line is passed. To make the warning fair, so far as possible the line should be clear." *McBoyle v. United States*, 283 U.S. 25, 27 (1931). And "lenity's emphasis on fair notice isn't about indulging a fantasy. It is about protecting an indispensable part of the rule of law—the promise that, whether or not individuals happen to read the law, they can suffer penalties only for violating standing rules announced in advance." *Wooden*, 142 S.Ct. at 1083 (Gorsuch, J., concurring).

Lenity also protects the separation of powers: the legislature sets penalties for certain conduct, the executive prosecutes alleged violations and, ultimately, the judiciary imposes applicable punishment. *See United States v. Bass*, 404 U.S. 336, 348 (1971). Lenity "strikes the appropriate balance between the legislature, the prosecutor, and the court" in defining liability. *Liparota v. United States*, 471 U.S. 419, 427 (1985). "It 'places the weight of inertia

upon the party that can best induce Congress to speak more clearly,' forcing the government to seek any clarifying changes to the law rather than impose the costs of ambiguity on presumptively free persons." *Wooden*, 142 S.Ct. at 1083 (Gorsuch, J., concurring) (quoting *Santos*, 553 U.S. at 514). "In this way, the rule helps keep the power of punishment firmly 'in the legislative, not in the judicial department.'" *Id.* (quoting *Wiltberger*, 5 Wheat. at 95.). Thus, as this Court has said in the removal context, "We will not attribute to Congress a purpose to make [a noncitizen's] right to remain here dependent on circumstances so fortuitous and capricious as those upon which the Immigration Service has here seized." *Delgadillo v. Carmichael*, 332 U.S. 388, 391 (1947).

Finally, and "perhaps most importantly," lenity embodies "the instinctive distaste[] against" laws imposing punishment "'unless the lawmaker has clearly said they should.'" *Nasir*, 17 F.4th at 474 (Bibas, J., concurring) (quoting *Bass*, 404 U.S. at 347 (citation omitted)). By promoting liberty, lenity "fits with one of the core purposes of our Constitution, to 'secure the Blessings of Liberty' for all[.]" *Id.* (quoting U.S. Const. pmbl.); *see also Wooden*, 142 S.Ct. at 1081 (Gorsuch, J., concurring) ("Under [the rule of lenity] any reasonable doubt about the application of a penal law must be resolved in favor of liberty.").

B. When the Rule of Lenity Applies to Resolve Statutory Ambiguity, *Chevron* Deference Is Precluded.

"[W]hen liberty is at stake," deference "has no role to play." *Guedes v. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms & Explosives*, 140 S.Ct. 789, 790 (2020)

(Gorsuch, J., statement regarding denial of certiorari). The "primary reason for *Chevron* is that it allows the executive branch to make policy decisions through the accrued expertise of administrative agencies. But in exchange, *Chevron* deference shifts the responsibility for lawmaking from the Congress to the Executive, at least in part. That tradeoff cannot be justified for criminal statutes, in which the public's entitlement to clarity in the law is at its highest." *Cargill v. Garland*, 57 F.4th 447, 466 (5th Cir. 2023) (en banc).

After this Court's decision in *Kisor v. Wilkie*, 139 S.Ct. 2400 (2019), "awoke [courts] from [their] slumber of reflexive deference," the rule of lenity has "thus been thrust to the fore." *Nasir*, 17 F.4th at 472 (Bibas, J., concurring). "Before deferring, [a court] must first exhaust [] traditional tools of statutory construction. . . . And one tool among many stands out as well suited to the task: the rule of lenity." *Id.*

Any other conclusion "raises serious constitutional concerns" about the proper role of courts. *Valenzuela Gallardo*, 968 F.3d at 1059. "The rule of lenity and *Chevron* deference are typically mutually exclusive[.]" *Id.* at 1060. Lenity, of course, reflects the primacy of the legislature in imposing punishment. *Id.* n.3. *Chevron* just reflects judicial policy "to permit agencies to fill in the details of a statute." *Id.* When the policy of *Chevron* deference collides with the constitutional imperative reflected by the rule of lenity—lenity prevails. *Nasir*, 17 F.4th at 474; *see also Hylton v. U.S. Att'y Gen.*, 992 F.3d 1154, 1158 (11th Cir. 2021) (applying lenity instead of deference).

And all of this flows from the language of *Chevron* itself, because at the outset, a court "evaluate[s]

whether Congress has written clearly," and "[t]o determine whether a statute has a plain meaning," a court asks "whether its meaning may be settled by the 'traditional tools of statutory construction.'" *Hylton*, 992 F.3d at 1157–58 (quoting *Chevron*, 467 U.S. at 843 n.9). "These tools encompass our 'regular interpretive method,' *Gen. Dynamics Land Sys., Inc. v. Cline*, 540 U.S. 581, 600 (2004), including the canons of construction." *Id*. at 1158. "Where, as here, the canons supply an answer, *Chevron* leaves the stage." *Epic Sys. Corp.*, 138 S.Ct. at 1630; *see also Solid Waste Agency of N. Cook Cnty. v. U.S. Army Corps of Eng'rs*, 531 U.S. 159, 173 (2001) (refusing to apply *Chevron*, in part, because of canon of constitutional avoidance concerning the agency interpretation).

In fact, this Court has followed this analysis before, applying the immigration rule of lenity to resolve a potential statutory ambiguity and *then* concluding that *Chevron* deference was no longer warranted. *See INS v. St. Cyr.*, 533 U.S. 289, 320 (2001). In *St. Cyr*, this Court applied "the longstanding principle of construing any lingering ambiguities in deportation statutes in favor of the alien," to "foreclose[]" a punitive reading of a deportation statute. 533 U.S. at 320. *Then*, in a footnote, it cast aside a call to "extend deference under *Chevron*," because, after "applying the normal 'tools of statutory construction'" there was, "for *Chevron* purposes, no ambiguity in such a statute for an agency to resolve." *Id*. at n.45 (citation omitted).

In the end, if there is uncertainty in the meaning of the statutory provision, then the rule of lenity provides a clear answer. Any lingering ambiguity

must be resolved in favor of a noncitizen. And with that ambiguity resolved, there is no remaining role for *Chevron* deference.

C. The Courts of Appeals Continue to Discard the Rule of Lenity in Favor of Reflexive Deference to the BIA.

While the primacy of the rule of lenity is clear as a constitutional matter, the lower courts have simply discarded it in favor of the BIA's punitive interpretation. This Court needs desperately to remedy this situation.

As this case demonstrates, the split in interpretation over the statutory question arises solely because of the larger confusion about the proper role of *Chevron* deference in this context. *See, e.g.*, *Flores v. Att'y Gen. United States*, 856 F.3d 280, 287 n.23 (3d Cir. 2017) ("In contrast to other circuits, we do not defer to the BIA's interpretation of the Obstruction Provision in making this determination."); *Higgins v. Holder*, 677 F.3d 97, 103 (2d Cir. 2012) ("There is a circuit split on the question of whether deference is owed to the BIA's reasoning" concerning the phrase "offense relating to obstruction of justice."). Moreover, as the Ninth Circuit recognized while addressing the statutory question at issue here, deferring to the BIA's understanding of the phrase "offense relating to obstruction of justice" "raises serious constitutional concerns" concerning the proper role of the rule of lenity. *Valenzuela Gallardo*, 968 F.3d at 1059. Nevertheless, like the Fourth Circuit below, courts have clung to the view that the rule of lenity can *never* apply when an administrative body like the BIA interprets a statute. *See, e.g.*, *Silva v.*

Garland, 27 F.4th 95, 112–13 (1st Cir. 2022) (holding court must "defer to the BIA's interpretation of a statute with criminal implications"); *Pugin*, 19 F.4th at 444 ("This is a civil proceeding interpreting a civil statute. Any ancillary criminal consequences are too attenuated. As a result, lenity cannot displace *Chevron* here."); *Valenzuela Gallardo*, 968 F.3d at 1059, 1062 (concluding, despite "serious constitutional concerns," it was "not free to take a fresh look at the *Chevron* Step Zero question"). Even when an agency's reading of an ambiguous statute results in unforeseeable consequences like expulsion from the United States or even incarceration, some courts claim not to be able to adopt a contrary reading. *See Silva*, 27 F.4th at 112–13.

The culprit, it seems, is this Court's opinion in *Babbitt v. Sweet Home Chapter, Communities for Great Ore.*, 515 U.S. 687, 704 n.18 (1995), where the majority deferred to an agency's interpretation of a law that carried criminal penalties. *See, e.g.*, *Silva*, 27 F.4th at 112 (concluding that applying the rule of lenity to BIA interpretation is "flatly inconsistent" with *Babbitt*). Justice Scalia later referred to that part of the opinion as a "drive-by ruling" that "contradicts the many cases before and since holding that, if a law has both criminal and civil applications, the rule of lenity governs its interpretation in both settings." *Whitman v. United States*, 574 U.S. 1003, 1003 (2014) (Scalia, J., joined by Thomas, J., statement regarding denial of certiorari). "With deference to agency interpretations of statutory provisions to which criminal prohibitions are attached, federal administrators can in effect create (and uncreate) new crimes at will, so long as they do not roam beyond

ambiguities that the laws contain." *Id.* And since *Babbitt*, this Court has affirmed that it has "never held that the Government's reading of a criminal statute is entitled to any deference." *United States v. Apel*, 571 U.S. 359, 369 (2014); *see also Abramski v. United States*, 573 U.S. 169, 191 (2014) ("The critical point is that criminal laws are for courts, not for the Government, to construe."); *Cargill*, 57 F.4th at 467 ("Several courts cite *Babbitt* for the proposition that the *Chevron* framework applies with equal force to criminal regulations and displaces the rule of lenity, but it does not support that conclusion."). Yet the lower courts remain insistent that their hands are tied. *See, e.g.*, *Silva*, 27 F.4th at 112.

At least twice this Court has granted certiorari to finally redirect the lower courts, but each time it resolved the cases on other grounds. *See, e.g.*, *Esquivel-Quintana v. Sessions*, 137 S.Ct. 1562, 1572 (2017) ("We have no need to resolve whether the rule of lenity or *Chevron* receives priority in this case because the statute, read in context, unambiguously forecloses the Board's interpretation."); *Barber v. Thomas*, 560 U.S. 474, 488 (2010) (declining to apply the rule of lenity to sentencing provision but also declining to consider *Chevron* deference to agency). Meanwhile, a growing chorus of judges on the courts of appeals has expressed concern for *Chevron* deference's victory over the rule of lenity. *See, e.g.*, *Cargill*, 57 F.4th at 468 ("*Chevron* does not apply here because the statutory language at issue implicates criminal penalties."); *Gun Owners of Am., Inc. v. Garland*, 19 F.4th 890, 921 (6th Cir. 2021) (Murphy, J., dissenting, joined by Sutton, C.J., Batchelder, Kethledge, Thapar, Bush, Larsen, and Nalbandian,

JJ.) (It is "preposterous to say that when criminal statutes are ambiguous, the Department of Justice is permitted to construe them as it sees fit. Two of our foundational principles—the separation of powers and due process—should lead us to adopt the opposite presumption.") (citation omitted); *Aposhian v. Wilkinson*, 989 F.3d 890, 898 (10th Cir. 2021) (Tymkovich, C.J., dissenting, joined by Hartz, Holmes, Eid, and Carson, JJ.) ("*Chevron* only kicks in once the traditional tools of interpretation have been exhausted. . . . We still have one left in our toolbox: the rule of lenity."); *Valenzuela Gallardo*, 968 F.3d at 1059 (noting deference to BIA "raises serious constitutional concerns" otherwise protected by the rule of lenity).

This Court is thus, at last, faced with the opportunity to resolve this question. In choosing which of the lower courts' decisions was correct, the deciding factor is whether deference is owed to the BIA. This Court can finally make clear that administrative decisions that come with the harsh consequences of permanent banishment, or that will affect criminal prosecutions, are owed no deference. Instead, respect for Congress' proper role and fair notice to affected parties compels lenity.

CONCLUSION

"As [this Court has] explained on many prior occasions, the separation of powers is designed to preserve the liberty of all the people." *Collins v. Yellen*, 141 S.Ct. 1761, 1780 (2021). When power is improperly consolidated, violations of other rights have no remedy. But the petitioners, and countless others, face the most severe consequences available to the government through the BIA's improper exercise

of power. This Court should finally set things right and clarify the proper role that the rule of lenity plays in such circumstances.

DATED: March 24, 2023.

Respectfully submitted,

OLIVER J. DUNFORD
Pacific Legal Foundation
4440 PGA Blvd., Ste. 307
Palm Beach Gardens, FL 33410
916.503.9060
ODunford@pacificlegal.org

CALEB J. KRUCKENBERG
Counsel of Record
Pacific Legal Foundation
3100 Clarendon Blvd.
Ste. 1000
Arlington, VA 22201
202.888.6881
CKruckenberg@pacificlegal.org

Counsel for Amicus Curiae Pacific Legal Foundation

Nos. 22-23 and 22-331

In The
Supreme Court of the United States

JEAN FRANCOIS PUGIN,

Petitioner,

v.

MERRICK B. GARLAND, Attorney General,

Respondent.

MERRICK B. GARLAND, Attorney General,

Petitioner,

v.

FERNANDO CORDERO-GARCIA,

Respondent.

On Petition for Writs of Certiorari to the United States Court of Appeals for the Fourth and Ninth Circuit

CERTIFICATE OF COMPLIANCE

As required by Supreme Court Rule 33.1(h), I certify that the BRIEF AMICUS CURIAE OF PACIFIC LEGAL FOUNDATION IN SUPPORT OF THE PETITIONER PUGIN AND RESPONDENT CORDERO-GARCIA contains 5,680 words, excluding the parts of the document that are exempted by Supreme Court Rule 33.1(d).

I declare under penalty of perjury that the foregoing is true and correct.

Executed on March 24, 2023.

CALEB J. KRUCKENBERG
Counsel of Record
Pacific Legal Foundation

3100 Clarendon Blvd., Ste. 610
Arlington, VA 22201
202.888.6881
CKruckenberg@pacificlegal.org

Counsel for Amicus Curiae Pacific Legal Foundation

2311 Douglas Street
Omaha, Nebraska 68102-1214

1-800-225-6964
(402) 342-2831
Fax: (402) 342-4850

COCKLE Legal Briefs Est. 1923

E-Mail Address:
contact@cocklelegalbriefs.com

Web Site
www.cocklelegalbriefs.com

Nos. 22-23 and 22-331

JEAN FRANCOIS PUGIN,
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MERRICK B. GARLAND, Attorney General,
Respondent.

_____

MERRICK B. GARLAND, Attorney General,
Petitioner,
v.
FERNANDO CORDERO-GARCIA,
Respondent.

AFFIDAVIT OF SERVICE

I, Andrew Cockle, of lawful age, being duly sworn, upon my oath state that I did, on the 24th day of March, 2023, send out from Omaha, NE 3 package(s) containing 3 copies of the BRIEF AMICUS CURIAE OF PACIFIC LEGAL FOUNDATION IN SUPPORT OF PETITIONER PUGIN AND RESPONDENT CORDERO-GARCIA in the above entitled case. All parties required to be served have been served by Priority Mail. Packages were plainly addressed to the following:

SEE ATTACHED

To be filed for:

OLIVER J. DUNFORD
Pacific Legal Foundation
4440 PGA Blvd., Ste. 307
Palm Beach Gardens
FL 33410
916.503.9060
ODunford@pacificlegal.org

CALEB J. KRUCKENBERG
Counsel of Record
Pacific Legal Foundation
3100 Clarendon Blvd.
Suite 1000
Arlington, VA 22201
202.888.6881
CKruckenberg@pacificlegal.org

Subscribed and sworn to before me this 24th day of March, 2023.
I am duly authorized under the laws of the State of Nebraska to administer oaths.

GENERAL NOTARY-State of Nebraska
RENEE J. GOSS
My Comm. Exp. September 5, 2023

Renee J. Goss
Notary Public

Andrew H. Cockle
Affiant

Service List

Jean Francois Pugin v. Merrick B. Garland
Merrick B. Garland v. Fernando Cordero-Garcia
U.S. Supreme Court Docket Nos. 22-23 & 22-331

Michael R. Dreeben
O'Melveny & Myers LLP
1625 Eye Street, NW
Washington, DC 20006
202-383-5400
mdreeben@omm.com
Counsel for Petitioner Jean Francois Pugin

Mark C. Fleming
Wilmer Cutler Pickering Hale and Dorr LLP
60 State Street
Boston, MA 02109
617-526-6000
mark.fleming@wilmerhale.com
Counsel for Respondent Fernando Cordero-Garcia

Elizabeth B. Prelogar
Solicitor General
United States Department of Justice
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20530-0001
202-514-2217
SupremeCtBriefs@USDOJ.gov
Counsel for Respondent/Petitioner Merrick B. Garland

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A new docket entry, "Amicus brief of Pacific Legal Foundation submitted." has been added for Jean Francois Pugin, Petitioner v. Merrick B. Garland, Attorney General. You have been signed up to receive email notifications for No. 22-23.

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Good Morning Counsel,
Attached please find the Brief Amicus Curiae of Pacific Legal Foundation in Support of Petitioner Pugin and Respondent Cordero-Garcia with was filed Friday afternoon.
Sincerely,

Katherine Turnbill | Legal Secretary
Pacific Legal Foundation
916.419.7111 | Office
In office: 8 am to 4:30 pm (EST)