King v. Burwell: What Does It Portend for Chevron’s Domain?

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INTRODUCTION

In King v. Burwell, the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the Fourth Circuit’s decision, upholding regulations that extend the Premium Tax Credit (the Credit) to qualifying taxpayers who purchase health insurance on the Internet-based “Marketplace” operated by the federal Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), despite statutory language extending the subsidy to individuals who purchase through “an Exchange established by the State.” This was the second time in just three years that the Roberts Court engaged in what one critic called “linguistic acrobatics” that rescued President Obama’s signature healthcare law, the Affordable Care Act (ACA)—or, as Justice Scalia derisively called it, “SCOTUScare”—from attacks that would have gutted its core provisions.

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5. King, 135 S. Ct. at 2507 (“This Court . . . rewrites the law to make tax credits available everywhere. We should start calling this law SCOTUScare.”).
While the King Court could have achieved the same result by deferring to Treasury’s interpretation in the regulation the plaintiffs were challenging, it elected not to defer. Instead, the Court rejected the application of Chevron and, declaring King an “extraordinary case[,]” conducted its own interpretation of the ACA. Thus, the Court reached a pro-government result without deferring to an agency rule.

After King, scholars and lower courts may find themselves struggling with the contrast between decisions that seem to expand agency power and those that find Chevron inapplicable. Accordingly, this Essay analyzes what King suggests about the future of Chevron deference. Part I considers the King majority’s treatment of Chevron. Part II examines the effect of the Court’s lack of deference in King. The Essay concludes that although King was an “extraordinary case” for the Court, Chevron’s heyday may be on the wane.

I. The King Court’s Treatment of Chevron

In King, four plaintiffs sued the Secretaries of HHS and Treasury, as well as the acting Commissioner of the IRS, because they did not wish to comply with the ACA’s individual mandate. The plaintiffs, residents of Virginia, lacked access to employer- or government-sponsored insurance, so their alternative was to purchase a plan on Virginia’s federally facilitated Exchange. Although plaintiffs’ incomes (absent any subsidy) would have
been low enough to qualify them for an exemption from the individual mandate, they were each deemed eligible for the Credit. As a result, they came within the ambit of the mandate, and they were required to either purchase insurance or remit a “shared responsibility payment.”

Plaintiffs contended that the regulation extending the Credit to federal Exchange purchasers, Treas. Reg. § 1.36B−2, was incompatible with the unambiguous language of I.R.C. § 36B (Section 36B) and its companion provisions and thus exceeded Treasury’s authority. The district court and the Fourth Circuit ruled in favor of the government, deferring to Treasury’s interpretation under the traditional Chevron formulation.

The Supreme Court granted certiorari and, in a 6–3 decision, found the Credit available to purchasers on the federal Marketplace. After reciting the issue, the Court stated:

When analyzing an agency’s interpretation of a statute, we often apply the two-step framework announced in Chevron. Under that framework, we ask whether the statute is ambiguous and, if so, whether the agency’s interpretation is reasonable. This approach “is premised on the theory that a statute’s ambiguity constitutes an implicit delegation from Congress to the agency to fill in the statutory gaps. In extraordinary cases, however, there may be reason to hesitate before concluding that Congress has intended


14. Treasury regulation § 1.36B−2(a) (2014) parrots the ACA’s grant of a subsidy for taxpayers who enroll in plans via an Exchange. See I.R.C. § 36B(b)(2)(a) (2012). But § 1.36B−1(k), the regulation’s definitions provision, states that “Exchange” has the same meaning as in 45 C.F.R. § 155.20 (2014), an HHS regulation. That regulation provides that “Exchange” includes insurance markets for qualified individuals “regardless of whether the Exchange is established and operated by a State . . . or by HHS.”
15. King, 997 F. Supp. 2d at 428. Section 36B(b)(2)(A) authorizes the Credit for taxpayers who purchase plans “through an Exchange established by the State under [section] 1311 of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act.” ACA section 1311—now codified at 42 U.S.C. § 18031—in turn provides that an Exchange “shall make available qualified health plans to qualified individuals.” 42 U.S.C. § 18031(d)(2)(A) (2012). A “qualified individual” is someone “seeking to enroll in a qualified health plan in the individual market offered through the Exchange” and, importantly, “resides in the State that established the Exchange.” Id. § 18032(f)(1)(A). That language seems to suggest that the Credit authorized by Section 36B is limited to consumers who purchase insurance products on a state Exchange. Obviously, the regulatory provisions discussed in supra note 14 are incompatible with that reading—hence the dispute in King.
17. Id. at 2496.
such an implicit delegation.”

This is one of those cases.\(^\text{18}\)

Thus, in just a few sentences, the majority dispensed with \textit{Chevron}.

The Court then explained why \textit{King} was a case in which Congress may not have intended an implicit delegation:

The tax credits are among the Act’s key reforms, involving billions of dollars in spending each year and affecting the price of health insurance for millions of people. Whether those credits are available on Federal Exchanges is thus a question of deep “economic and political significance” that is central to this statutory scheme; had Congress wished to assign that question to an agency, it \textit{surely would have done so expressly}.\(^\text{19}\)

Oddly, the Court did not address an apparent express delegation to Treasury in the Internal Revenue Code section it was interpreting, Section 36B: “The Secretary [of the Treasury] shall prescribe such regulations as may be necessary to carry out the provisions of this section . . . .”\(^\text{20}\) The Court may have had concerns about whether the delegation encompassed the regulation in question, but it didn’t say so. Its silence regarding the delegation is particularly puzzling given that the Fourth Circuit’s opinion in the case stated that that language “clearly gives to the IRS authority to resolve ambiguities in 26 U.S.C. § 36B.”\(^\text{21}\)

The Supreme Court majority also stated that it was “especially unlikely that Congress would have delegated this decision to the IRS, which has no expertise in crafting health insurance policy.”\(^\text{22}\) However, the inclusive definition of “Exchange” is actually an HHS definition that Treasury cross-references.\(^\text{23}\) Presumably, HHS \textit{does} have the requisite expertise to regulate

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  \item Id. at 2488–89 (citations omitted) (quoting FDA v. Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corp., 529 U.S. 120, 159 (2000)).
  \item Id. at 2489 (emphasis added) (quoting Util. Air Regulatory Grp. v. EPA, 134 S. Ct. 2427, 2444 (2014)).
  \item King v. Burwell, 759 F.3d 358, 375 (4th Cir. 2014).
  \item King, 135 S. Ct. at 2489.
  \item See supra note 14. The regulatory narrative is murky, however. According to a Report by the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, Treasury requested that HHS produce the definition that Treasury then cross-referenced. \textit{See Darrell Issa \\& Dave Camp, H. Comm. on Oversight \\& Gov’t Reform, H. Comm. on Ways and Means, Administration Conducted}
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in this area. Yet, because the majority found that this was an extraordinary case, and “not a case for the IRS,”24 it concluded that the Court itself was tasked with interpreting Section 36B.

The majority then reached the same result that the lower courts—and Treasury—had reached.25 However, finding the phrase “Exchange established by the State” ambiguous, the majority looked beyond the text of Section 36B to the ACA’s broader structure.26 It then interpreted the ACA in a manner consistent with what it found was Congress’s intent—i.e., “to improve health insurance markets, not to destroy them.”27 The fact that the Court’s failure to accord Chevron deference was unnecessary to the result in the case may say something about the future of Chevron: the deference doctrine may not be as bedrock as it once seemed.

II. WHY DIDN’T THE KING COURT DEFER?

At first blush, it could seem that the Court did not accord deference to the regulations because they were tax regulations. That interpretation would be consistent with the Court’s observation that the IRS has no health-policy expertise.28 But, as discussed above, the regulatory definition in question is

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24. King, 135 S. Ct. at 2489.

25. The majority found that it was “implausible that Congress meant the Act to operate” in the dysfunctional manner that plaintiff-petitioners proposed. Id. at 2494. “Had Congress meant to limit tax credits to State Exchanges,” the majority concluded, “it likely would have done so in . . . some . . . prominent matter. It would not have used such a winding path of connect-the-dots provisions about the amount of the credit.” Id. at 2495.

26. Id. at 2491–92.

27. Id. at 2496. The Court took a similar approach in FDA v. Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corp., 529 U.S. 120 (2000), stating, “In determining whether Congress has specifically addressed the question at issue, a reviewing court should not confine itself to examining a particular statutory provision in isolation.” Id. at 132. This approach is reminiscent of the “purposive” approach Judge Learned Hand applied in cases such as Helvering v. Gregory, 69 F.2d 809 (2d Cir. 1934), aff’d, 293 U.S. 465 (1935). See Shannon Weeks McCormack, Tax Shelters and Statutory Interpretation: A Much Needed Purposive Approach, 2009 U. Ill. L. Rev. 697, 718.

28. See King, 135 S. Ct. at 2489.
King v. Burwell: What Does It Portend for Chevron’s Domain?

PEPPERDINE LAW REVIEW

actually an HHS definition that Treasury cross-references. Moreover, just four years earlier, the Court announced—in another opinion written by the Chief Justice—that in the absence of justification, it was “not inclined to carve out an approach to administrative review good for tax law only.”

Furthermore, the Court’s statement that it was unlikely that Congress would have delegated this issue to the IRS was the Court’s second stated reason not to defer. The majority first stated, “Whether those credits are available on Federal Exchanges is...a question of deep ‘economic and political significance’ that is central to this statutory scheme; had Congress wished to assign that question to an agency, it surely would have done so expressly.” So, it seems clear that King was about more than which agency interpreted the statute.

Though the King Court’s departure from Chevron was atypical, it was not unprecedented. In FDA v. Brown & Williamson Tobacco Corp., the Court affirmed the Fourth Circuit’s decision invalidating FDA regulations governing tobacco marketing on the ground that Congress had not delegated authority to the FDA to regulate in this area. As a result, the FDA’s efforts to restrict cigarette advertising were temporarily stymied, a development welcomed by the tobacco industry. Writing for the Court, Justice O’Connor explained that while “agencies are generally entitled to deference in the interpretation of statutes that they administer,” in that case, Congress “clearly precluded the FDA from asserting jurisdiction to regulate tobacco products.” Such jurisdiction was “inconsistent with the intent that Congress...expressed in the [Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act’s (FDCA)] overall regulatory scheme and in the tobacco-specific legislation that it...enacted subsequent to the FDCA.”

29. See supra note 14; text accompanying note 23.
32. 529 U.S. 120.
35. Id. at 126. The Chevron case stated that a court reviewing an agency determination “is confronted with two questions.” Chevron, U.S.A., Inc. v. Natural Res. Def. Council, Inc., 467 U.S. 837, 842 (1984). In the pre-Mead case of Brown & Williamson, before the idea of “Chevron Step Zero” had taken hold, see Thomas W. Merrill & Kristin E. Hickman, Chevron’s Domain, 89 GEO. L.J. 833, 836 (2001) (coining that term), the majority purported to situate its analysis within Chevron Step One. However, the Court’s decision in Brown & Williamson—finding that the FDA lacked jurisdiction altogether with respect to tobacco—is quite different from the ordinary Step One case,
The Brown & Williamson Court articulated an exception to Chevron that precluded deference:

Deference under Chevron to an agency’s construction of a statute that it administers is premised on the theory that a statute’s ambiguity constitutes an implicit delegation from Congress to the agency to fill in the statutory gaps. In extraordinary cases, however, there may be reason to hesitate before concluding that Congress has intended such an implicit delegation.\(^{36}\)

The majority found that Brown & Williamson was “hardly an ordinary case,” given the importance of the tobacco industry in the American economy, the FDA’s history of restraint in this area, and the distinct regulatory scheme Congress had established for tobacco products.\(^{37}\)

Six years later, in Gonzales v. Oregon, the Court again declined deference to an agency interpretation.\(^{38}\) In Gonzales, the Court reviewed an interpretive rule promulgated by the U.S. Attorney General, purporting to include drugs used for physician-assisted suicide among those substances subject to the federal Controlled Substances Act (CSA).\(^{39}\) The Court found that the rule was not entitled to Chevron deference because Congress, through the CSA, had granted the Attorney General only the power to promulgate rules relating to registration and control of substance dispensing, not the power to denounce state-authorized medical standards.\(^{40}\) The Court acknowledged that the CSA included ambiguous language susceptible to varying constructions.\(^{41}\) But as the Court explained, “Chevron deference . . . is not accorded merely because the statute is ambiguous and an administrative official is involved. To begin with, the rule must be promulgated pursuant to authority Congress has delegated to the official.”\(^{42}\) The Attorney General claimed “extraordinary authority,”\(^{43}\) so his interpretation was not entitled to deference.

Perhaps King is simply of a piece with Brown & Williamson and Gonzales, the (relatively) rare case in which an agency acts without congressionally delegated authority: no delegation, no deference. But

where the Court determines whether a particular agency interpretation is consistent with Congress’s unambiguous intent.

\(^{36}\) Brown & Williamson, 529 U.S. at 159.
\(^{37}\) Id. at 159–60; see also 7 U.S.C. § 1311(a) (2000) (repealed 2004) (“The marketing of tobacco constitutes one of the greatest basic industries of the United States with ramifying activities which directly affect interstate and foreign commerce at every point, and stable conditions therein are necessary to the general welfare.”).
\(^{39}\) Id. at 258, 275.
\(^{40}\) Id. at 257–58.
\(^{41}\) Id. at 258.
\(^{42}\) Id.
\(^{43}\) Id. at 262.
according to the Court, in Brown & Williamson, the FDA had no authority to regulate tobacco marketing, period;\(^44\) in Gonzales, the Attorney General had no authority to invalidate state-authorized medical treatments, full stop.\(^45\) By contrast, Treasury and the IRS presumably have substantial authority under the ACA to administer the Credit.\(^46\) King is not a tale of an agency acting ultra vires, at least not in the traditional sense. So while King may be an “extraordinary case,” it is worth taking a step back to look at the larger context.

First, the Justices do not all agree on the scope of Chevron’s domain. The Chief Justice has expressed concern about agency aggrandizement under Chevron. For instance, he dissented vigorously from Justice Scalia’s holding in City of Arlington v. FCC that agency interpretations concerning the scope of their own jurisdiction are entitled to deference.\(^47\) Joined by Justices Kennedy and Alito, Roberts described his disagreement with the majority as “fundamental” and “easily expressed: A court should not defer to an agency until the court decides, on its own, that the agency is entitled to deference.”\(^48\)

By contrast, Justice Scalia ordinarily is a strong advocate for Chevron deference.\(^49\) Writing for the City of Arlington majority, he characterized the Chief Justice’s dissent as proposing “a massive revision of our Chevron jurisprudence,” writing that no case has ever held that “a general conferral of rulemaking or adjudicative authority [is] . . . insufficient to support Chevron deference for an exercise of that authority within the agency’s substantive field.”\(^50\)

Perhaps King is the next stage of Chief Justice Roberts’s “massive revision” of Chevron. However, it is worth noting that Justice Scalia did not argue that Chevron analysis applied in King, even to deny deference at Step One. His argument focused instead on statutory interpretation: “Under all

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44. See supra notes 34–35 and accompanying text.
45. See supra note 40 and accompanying text.
46. See I.R.C. § 36B(g) (2012) (“The Secretary shall prescribe such regulations as may be necessary to carry out the provisions of this section . . . .”).
47. 133 S. Ct. 1863, 1874–75 (2013).
48. Id. at 1877 (Roberts, C.J., dissenting). Chief Justice Roberts may not be the only Justice with reservations about Chevron. At oral argument in King, Justice Kennedy mused that while statutory ambiguity would normally prompt deference, “it seems . . . a drastic step . . . to say that the Department of Internal Revenue and its director [sic] can make this call one way or the other when there are, what, billions of dollars of subsidies involved here?” Transcript of Oral Argument at 74, King v. Burwell, 135 S. Ct. 2480 (2015) (No. 14-114).
49. See, e.g., City of Arlington, 133 S. Ct. 1863 (Scalia, J., for the majority); United States v. Mead Corp., 533 U.S. 218, 239 (2001) (Scalia, J., dissenting).
50. City of Arlington, 133 S. Ct. at 1874.
the usual rules of interpretation . . . the Government should lose this case."

King seems therefore to be more than a mere pawn in a general dispute among the Justices about the breadth of the *Chevron* doctrine.

King should also be considered in light of *National Cable & Telecommunications Ass’n v. Brand X Internet Services*, a case addressing agency reinterpretations.52 Had the King Court invoked *Chevron* to rule for the government, Treasury—perhaps prompted by a future Administration—would have been free to revise the regulation in question to limit the Credit to purchasers on State exchanges.53 Presumably such a revision would have been entitled to deference.54 In *Brand X*, the Court stated that “[o]nly a judicial precedent holding that [a] statute unambiguously forecloses the agency’s interpretation, and therefore contains no gap for the agency to fill, displaces a conflicting agency construction.”55 King adds a wrinkle to *Brand X*, because the King Court found that Section 36B was ambiguous.56 But the effect of the King Court’s rejection of the ordinary *Chevron* framework is to foreclose the agency reinterpretation that *Brand X* allows. Ultimately, the King analysis threads a very narrow needle: because the statute is ambiguous, its reference to State Exchanges need not be interpreted literally, yet because *Chevron* does not apply, agency interpretations that conflict with the Court’s interpretation of the statute are precluded.

IV. CONCLUSION

The King majority’s analysis is initially puzzling because the Court could have reached the same pro-ACA result by simply applying *Chevron*. Moreover, it seems odd that the Court based its analysis on a doctrine (derived from *Brown & Williamson*) that frees courts from assuming implicit congressional delegations when, in fact, the statute contains an apparent explicit delegation.

Ultimately, King may not be just extraordinary but sui generis, a “wrecking ball” case that could have destabilized an important social program had the Court reached a different result. But King may also suggest

51. *King*, 135 S. Ct. at 2497 (Scalia, J., dissenting).
52. 545 U.S. 967 (2005).
54. See id. (noting that, during oral argument in *King*, Chief Justice Roberts asked about the possibility of agency reinterpretation); cf. *FCC v. Fox Television Stations, Inc.*, 556 U.S. 502, 514–15 (2009) (recognizing that an agency may implement a policy change so long as the “new policy is permissible under the statute, . . . there are good reasons for it, and . . . the agency believes it to be better” (emphasis omitted)).
55. *Brand X*, 545 U.S. at 982–83.
that our one-time expectations regarding judicial deference to agency interpretations may require reevaluation. Chief Justice Roberts’s “massive revision” to Chevron, decried by Justice Scalia in City of Arlington, 57 may be gaining traction. It will be interesting to see how the doctrine evolves in the coming Terms.

57. See supra note 50 and accompanying text.