

1-1-2011

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## Recommended Citation

Subrin, Stephen and Burbank, Stephen B., "Litigation and democracy: restoring a realistic prospect of trial" (2011). *School of Law Faculty Publications*. 280.

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# Litigation and Democracy: Restoring a Realistic Prospect of Trial

Stephen B. Burbank† & Stephen N. Subrin††

## I. THE VANISHING TRIAL

It struck us as odd. At some time, probably in the middle 1970s or early 1980s, we heard that major law firms were conducting mock trials so that their young lawyers could experience what it was like to be in a courtroom. This was something new. Historically, young lawyers witnessed cases in real courts, argued motions before judges, and watched partners and older associates try cases. Young lawyers soon tried simple cases before judges and later with juries. This is how they learned to be trial lawyers and not just litigators.

At about the same time, what Professor David Shapiro described as a “sea-change” was taking place among federal trial judges.<sup>1</sup> Many no longer perceived their primary tasks as deciding motions after oral argument and presiding as neutral referees at trials. They were encouraged to consider themselves managers whose job was to dispose of cases expeditiously. From that perspective trials came to seem wasteful. As early as 1971, one federal district court judge candidly said: “[M]y goal is to settle all my cases . . . Most of the time when I try a case I consider that I have somehow failed the lawyers and the litigants.”<sup>2</sup>

This change in judicial attitude and behavior began well before 1983 amendments to the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure explicitly broadened the managerial obligations of judges. Under amended Rule 16, judges were encouraged to help in “settling the case and using special procedures to assist in resolving the dispute when authorized by statute or local rule.”<sup>3</sup>

In addition, the increased use of summary judgment to terminate cases short of trial started many years before the Supreme Court encouraged it in a

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The authors thank John Burbank and Richard Marcus for comments on drafts.

<sup>1</sup> David L. Shapiro, *Federal Rule 16: A Look at the Theory and Practice of Rulemaking*, 137 U. PA. L. REV. 1969, 1983 (1989).

<sup>2</sup> David Neubauer, *Judicial Role and Case Management*, 4 JUST. SYS. J. 223, 228 (1978–1979) (quoting FED. JUDICIAL CTR., SEMINARS FOR NEWLY APPOINTED UNITED STATES DISTRICT JUDGES (West Publ'g Co. 1971) (quoting Fred J. Cassibry, Federal District Court Judge, Eastern District of Louisiana from 1966 to 1987)).

<sup>3</sup> FED. R. CIV. P. 16(c)(2)(I).

trilogy of decisions in 1985 and 1986.<sup>4</sup> Although definitive data are not available, “[t]here probably is sufficient and sufficiently reliable evidence . . . to believe that the rate of case termination as a result of summary judgment rose substantially in federal first-instance courts as a whole in the period from 1960 to 2000, with one plausible (and perhaps conservative) range being from approximately 1.8 percent in 1960 to approximately 7.7 percent in 2000.”<sup>5</sup>

Similarly, the 12(b)(6) motion to dismiss complaints for failure to state a claim early in the litigation process had become considerably more defendant-friendly in many federal district courts before recent Supreme Court cases blessed the change by effectively amending the relevant Federal Rules under the guise of interpretation.<sup>6</sup> Without rule change and on some occasions in direct violation of Supreme Court case law,<sup>7</sup> grants of 12(b)(6) motions had already increased in the federal trial courts, particularly in case types that some judges disfavored.<sup>8</sup> One early study, which for that reason and because it is based on published opinions can hardly be regarded as definitive, suggests that before these recent decisions, 46% of all 12(b)(6) motions to dismiss were granted. According to the same study, after the recent decisions, 56% of all 12(b)(6) motions were granted, 60% in constitutional civil rights cases.<sup>9</sup> These dismissals are almost always for defendants and occur before plaintiffs have had the opportunity for formal discovery.

In sum, the experience in both areas recalls Professor Shapiro’s memorable image when discussing the amendments to the case management rule: “At best, the argument might run, the task of rule makers is like the task of those who lay out the walks in the Cambridge Common: Figure out where people go and cover up the grass with cement on those routes.”<sup>10</sup>

It thus was for good reason that major firms started to create their own in-house moot courts and later to farm out young associates to attorney general, legal service, and public defender offices in order to provide training in courtroom behavior and trials. The data are astonishing: “When the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure became law in 1938, about 18% of civil cases in Federal Court were resolved by trial.”<sup>11</sup> In the early 1960s, the figure was

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<sup>4</sup> See Stephen B. Burbank, *Vanishing Trials and Summary Judgment in Federal Civil Cases: Drifting Toward Bethlehem or Gomorrah?*, 1 J. EMPIRICAL LEGAL STUD. 591, 620–21 (2004).

<sup>5</sup> *Id.* at 617–18.

<sup>6</sup> See Patricia W. Hatamyar, *The Tao of Pleading: Do Twombly and Iqbal Matter Empirically?*, 59 AM. U. L. REV. 553, 556 (2010).

<sup>7</sup> See *Swierkiewicz v. Sorema N.A.*, 534 U.S. 506, 511–12 (2002); *Leatherman v. Tarrant Cnty. Narcotics Intelligence & Coordination Unit*, 507 U.S. 163, 168 (1993).

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., Christopher M. Fairman, *Heightened Pleading*, 81 TEX. L. REV. 551 (2002); Richard L. Marcus, *The Revival of Fact Pleading Under the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure*, 86 COLUM. L. REV. 433 (1986).

<sup>9</sup> See Hatamyar, *supra* note 6, at 556.

<sup>10</sup> Shapiro, *supra* note 1, at 1992.

<sup>11</sup> Marc Galanter, *A World Without Trials?*, 2006 J. DISP. RESOL. 7, 12.

down to about 12%; in 2002, it was below 2%.<sup>12</sup> To some, the 60% reduction in overall trials since the mid-1980s was even “[m]ore startling.”<sup>13</sup>

## II. WHY THE VANISHING TRIAL—AND SOME OF ITS CAUSES— DIMINISH DEMOCRACY

Why does it matter? Isn't it a good thing to dispose of cases without trial? After all, over 150 years ago Abraham Lincoln proclaimed the advantages of settlement over trial.<sup>14</sup>

If one believes in the underlying values of American democracy, these developments are deeply troubling for a number of reasons. Since the founding of our country, trials in open court resulting in decisions by either a judge or a jury have been thought to be constitutive of American democracy.<sup>15</sup> Consider what it means for there to be trials open to the public, with the orderly presentation of evidence, oral testimony, judges explaining the law (in jury trials), and lawyers synthesizing the law and facts in an attempt to persuade a judge or jury of what justice requires. Those who are accused of a legal infraction have the right to appear in public and tell their side of the story. This right to be heard, the core of due process of law, has been integral to democratic thought and institutions at least since the English Magna Carta in the thirteenth century. Public trials ensure that each of us has the opportunity to see that the laws our representatives have chosen to replace the state of nature are more than empty promises (or threats)—that the community can and will enforce them.

Although most cases settle, some trials are essential, if only to ensure informed settlement. Without the realistic possibility of a trial, settlements in large measure reflect and discount the costs of discovery and trial. As a result, some plaintiffs receive less than the value of their cases if tried on the merits, while some defendants settle non-meritorious cases in order to avoid transaction costs. Moreover, apart from the value of litigated judgments as guides to settlement, many legal norms need community input for the decisions applying them to be accepted by that community. Issues such as negligence, intentional discrimination, material breach of contract, and unfair competition are not facts capable of scientific demonstration. Nor are these issues pure questions of law. Rather, they are concepts mixing elements of

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<sup>12</sup> Marc Galanter, *The Vanishing Trial: An Examination of Trials and Related Matters in Federal and State Courts*, 1 J. EMPIRICAL LEGAL STUD. 459, 461 (2004) [hereinafter Galanter, *Vanishing Trial*].

<sup>13</sup> *Id.* at 459.

<sup>14</sup> Abraham Lincoln, Fragment: Notes for a Law Lecture (July 1, 1850) in 2 COLLECTED WORKS OF ABRAHAM LINCOLN 81 (Roy P. Basler ed., 1953) (“Persuade your neighbors to compromise whenever you can. Point out to them how the nominal winner is often a real loser—in fees, expenses, and waste of time. As a peacemaker the lawyer has a superior opportunity of being a good man. There will still be business enough.”).

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., ROBERT P. BURNS, *THE DEATH OF THE AMERICAN TRIAL* 40–68, 112–35 (2009).

fact and law that become legitimate behavioral norms when the citizenry at large, acting through jury representatives, decides what the community deems acceptable. In addition, a public trial reminds the decision maker—judge or jury—that the lives of real human beings may be deeply affected by the decision. Finally, unlike confidential settlements, decisions after trial have the potential to affect the behavior of others, which may be a primary goal of the relevant legal norm.

With the diminution of trials generally has come the diminution of jury trials.<sup>16</sup> This is a tragedy. It is unlikely that there would have been a United States of America without the Bill of Rights, because the founders insisted on assurances of protection for their liberties before they would ratify the Constitution. There would not have been an acceptable Bill of Rights without a right to trial by jury.<sup>17</sup> Distrust of concentrated authority is a central feature of our system of government. When all thirteen colonies became states, they ensured the right to trial by jury in both criminal and civil cases of consequence.<sup>18</sup> They insisted on the same for litigation in the new federal courts.<sup>19</sup> Just as our federal system of many states and one federal government and the separation of powers between the executive, legislative, and judicial branches are thought to dilute power by dispersing it, trial by jury counterbalances the authority of judges.

The founders believed that twelve heads are better than one in finding facts.<sup>20</sup> They thought that since each juror would only decide one or a few cases, jurors would be less jaded than professional judges.<sup>21</sup> The inevitable prejudice of any one person would be offset by having to consult with many others.<sup>22</sup> Along with voting, jury service was, and remains, one of the few ways for ordinary citizens to participate in their own government, legitimizing decisions that resolve formal disputes in the eyes of the population at large. As Tocqueville observed in describing the newly created American state, participating as jurors and witnessing trials were critical means of educating Americans about the law and giving them a stake in their courts and country.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> In 1982, 4,771 of the federal civil cases that terminated were jury trials, accounting for 2.6% of all dispositions that year. In 2002, there were 3,006 civil jury trials among the terminated federal cases, accounting for 1.2% of all dispositions. In the same twenty-year period, however, jury trials as a percentage of all civil trials increased from 42.3% in 1982 to 65.8% in 2002. Galanter, *Vanishing Trial*, *supra* note 12, at 462–63.

<sup>17</sup> See BURNS, *supra* note 15, at 54–56.

<sup>18</sup> See Charles W. Wolfram, *The Constitutional History of the Seventh Amendment*, 57 MINN. L. REV. 639, 655–56 (1973).

<sup>19</sup> The Fifth, Sixth, and Seventh Amendments to the Constitution feature and protect the right to jury trial. See U.S. CONST. amend. V, VI, VII.

<sup>20</sup> See BURNS, *supra* note 15, at 53–68.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

<sup>22</sup> *Id.*

<sup>23</sup> See 1 ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, *DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA* 283–84 (Phillips Bradley ed., Vintage Books 1999) (1835).

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Jury bashing has been a recurrent theme in the attacks on litigation that have been waged by those seeking “tort reform” or changes in procedural rules. Yet, again and again, those consulting systematic empirical evidence rather than anecdotes find that the attacks on the jury are unsupported. Virtually everyone who has studied the American jury, including judges who preside over jury trials, find that jurors listen carefully to and follow the judge’s instructions on the law and obey their oaths to apply the law to the facts with impressive gravity and skill.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, empirical studies show that most Americans do not rush to court with every petty grievance. Notwithstanding occasional silly lawsuits, Americans lump most of their legitimate grievances rather than litigate.<sup>25</sup>

### III. RECENT PROCEDURAL ATTACKS ON DEMOCRACY

Two recent Supreme Court decisions that require more factual detail in complaints are an implicit attack on the jury trial and, in turn, on our democracy. In *Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly*,<sup>26</sup> decided in 2007, the Court reinstated under Rule 12(b)(6) the dismissal of an antitrust conspiracy complaint brought under the Sherman Act against the regional telecommunication service providers remaining after the breakup of AT&T. In reversing a panel of the Second Circuit, the Court “retired”<sup>27</sup> the language in *Conley v. Gibson* that “a complaint should not be dismissed . . . unless it appears beyond doubt that the plaintiff can prove no set of facts . . . which would entitle him to relief.”<sup>28</sup> *Conley* was a 1957 case that had been cited with approval by the Supreme Court, lower federal courts, and state courts literally thousands of times in the half-century after it was decided. In addition, the *Twombly* Court interpreted the system of notice pleading blessed in *Conley* that required plaintiffs to give fair notice to defendants so that defendants could prepare their cases to now mean that a complaint’s “[f]actual allegations must be enough to raise a right to relief above the speculative level.”<sup>29</sup> Disregarding the plaintiffs’ direct allegations of conspiracy as inadequate to meet this standard, the Court held that the plaintiffs’ claims were not plausible because they rested on “parallel conduct and not on any independent allegation of actual agreement among the [defendants].”<sup>30</sup>

For a time some courts and commentators struggled to determine *Twombly*’s meaning and scope of application, suggesting a number of limiting criteria such as complex cases portending massive, expensive discov-

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<sup>24</sup> See STEPHEN N. SUBRIN, ET AL., *CIVIL PROCEDURE: DOCTRINE, PRACTICE, AND CONTEXT* 427–37 (3d ed. 2008).

<sup>25</sup> See ROBERT A. KAGAN, *ADVERSARIAL LEGALISM: THE AMERICAN WAY OF LAW* 34 (2001).

<sup>26</sup> *Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544 (2007).

<sup>27</sup> *Id.* at 579 (Stevens, J., dissenting).

<sup>28</sup> See *id.* at 562 (majority opinion); *Conley v. Gibson*, 355 U.S. 41, 45–46 (1957).

<sup>29</sup> *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 555.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.* at 564.

ery.<sup>31</sup> The Court had expressed doubt that judicial management could control such discovery.<sup>32</sup> It turned out, however, that a majority of the Justices had a more radical agenda: they were determined to change the Federal Rules relating to pleading and motions to dismiss without following the statutory process.<sup>33</sup> In doing so, they bypassed notice and comment rulemaking and deprived Congress of the opportunity to review, and if necessary to block, any prospective policy choices before they became effective.<sup>34</sup>

The majority found their opportunity to change these rules in *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*,<sup>35</sup> which was decided in 2009. *Iqbal* involved claims brought by a citizen of Pakistan whom federal officials arrested after the 9/11 attacks and detained in a Brooklyn federal detention center on charges of fraud in connection with identification documents. He pled guilty, leading to his removal to Pakistan. His complaint alleged that he was confined for seven months in highly restrictive conditions and that Robert Mueller, the Director of the F.B.I., and John Ashcroft, the Attorney General of the United States, adopted or approved the policies and directives pursuant to which he was confined and that those policies purposely discriminated on the basis of religion and race.<sup>36</sup>

Over the dissent of four Justices, including the author of the Court's opinion in *Twombly* and another Justice who joined that opinion, the Court in *Iqbal* inconsistently treated some of the complaint's assertions as factual allegations and others as conclusions. Most notably, the Court disregarded direct allegations of intentional discrimination, notwithstanding Federal Rule 9(b)'s explicit assurance that "[m]alice, intent, knowledge, and other conditions of a person's mind . . . be alleged generally."<sup>37</sup> That move enabled the Court, however breezily, to assess the plausibility of the inferential basis for the theory of the plaintiff's case. Relying on "judicial experience and common sense,"<sup>38</sup> the Court found the complaint implausible. Because the Federal Rules are transsubstantive (the same rules for all types and sizes of cases), the Court was constrained to make clear that its approach applies across the board—that *Twombly* cannot be confined to antitrust cases, nor *Iqbal* applied only to cases involving national security or the qualified immunity of government officials.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> See Stephen B. Burbank, *Pleading and the Dilemmas of "General Rules,"* 2009 WIS. L. REV. 535, 546–48.

<sup>32</sup> See *id.* at 559–60.

<sup>33</sup> See 28 U.S.C. § 2072 (2006).

<sup>34</sup> See Stephen B. Burbank, *Pleading and the Dilemmas of Modern American Procedure,* 93 JUDICATURE 109, 110, 116–17, 119–20 (2009).

<sup>35</sup> *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 129 S. Ct. 1937 (2009).

<sup>36</sup> *Iqbal* also alleged that other federal officials subjected him to the unconstitutional use of excessive force, unreasonable and unnecessary strip and body-cavity searches, and denial of medical care while he was in detention. *Id.* at 1955 (Souter, J., dissenting).

<sup>37</sup> See *id.* at 1954 (majority opinion) (first alteration in original) (citing FED. R. CIV. P. 9(b)).

<sup>38</sup> *Id.* at 1950.

<sup>39</sup> See *id.* at 1953; Burbank, *supra* note 34.

The *Twombly* and *Iqbal* decisions, together with the decisions of some lower federal courts that ignored pre-*Twombly* precedent, can be seen as attacks on American democracy in at least four ways. First, the cases put the Seventh Amendment right to jury trial in federal court (and state jury rights in states that follow the decisions) in jeopardy. Charles Clark, the principal architect of the Federal Rules, was convinced that the line between facts, evidence, and legal conclusions was impossible to draw coherently.<sup>40</sup> Clark argued for years against the fact pleading requirement of the nineteenth century Field Code because it led to unproductive disputes about what was a fact, evidence, or legal conclusion. Consequently, the drafters of the Federal Rules refused to put the word “fact” in the pleading rules.<sup>41</sup>

Trial judges now explicitly have enormous discretionary power to dismiss complaints, both through their power to excise what they find to be a conclusive allegation and the addition of a plausibility requirement. Since the Court has eliminated Rule 9(b)’s permission to allege states of mind generally, and since intent must be proved in many discrimination cases, it has become even easier than in the past for judges who disfavor such cases to dismiss them prior to discovery. The same is true for any lawsuit, such as tort and antitrust cases, in which the most important evidence is in the minds and files of defendants. Many cases that were entitled to a jury trial—or any trial for that matter—and that would be found meritorious after discovery, will now be dismissed at the pleading stage.<sup>42</sup> So much for the historic role of juries to decide factual issues and thus check judicial power.

The second prong of this attack on democracy results from undercutting the effectiveness of congressional statutes designed to compensate citizens for injury or to enable private enforcement of important social norms. For decades, when enacting such statutes, Congress had the legitimate expectation that the Federal Rules as originally understood and long interpreted would be applied in federal civil litigation and thus that discovery would permit plaintiffs proceeding on the basis of a complaint stating a valid legal theory to assemble the evidence necessary to prove illegal conduct.<sup>43</sup> Congress has frequently included in enacted statutes pro-plaintiff fee-shifting and multiple damages provisions that encourage lawyers to serve as private attorneys general to enforce the rights conferred.<sup>44</sup> Professor Paul Car-

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<sup>40</sup> For Clark’s views on pleading, see Stephen N. Subrin, *How Equity Conquered Common Law: The Federal Rules of Civil Procedure in Historical Perspective*, 135 U. PA. L. REV. 909, 966 (1987) [hereinafter Subrin, *Equity*]; Stephen N. Subrin, *Charles E. Clark and His Procedural Outlook: The Disciplined Champion of Undisciplined Rules*, in JUDGE CHARLES EDWARD CLARK 115, 139–43 (Peninah Petruck ed., 1991).

<sup>41</sup> Subrin, *Equity*, *supra* note 40, at 976.

<sup>42</sup> See Alex Reinert, *The Costs of Heightened Pleading*, 86 IND. L.J. (forthcoming 2011), available at <http://ssrn.com/abstract=1666770>.

<sup>43</sup> See *Califano v. Yamasaki*, 442 U.S. 682, 700–01 (1979).

<sup>44</sup> For a comprehensive study of private enforcement of federal statutory law, see SEAN FARHANG, *THE LITIGATION STATE: PUBLIC REGULATION AND PRIVATE LAWSUITS IN THE U.S.* (2010).



rington, former Reporter to the Advisory Committee on Civil Rules, explained the point this way:

We should keep clearly in mind that discovery is the American alternative to the administrative state . . . . [E]very day, hundreds of American lawyers caution their clients that an unlawful course of conduct will be accompanied by serious risk of exposure at the hands of some hundreds of thousands of lawyers, each armed with a subpoena power by which misdeeds can be uncovered. Unless corresponding new powers are conferred on public officers, constricting discovery would diminish the disincentives for lawless behavior across a wide spectrum of forbidden conduct.<sup>45</sup>

Judge Patrick Higginbotham, former Chair of the Advisory Committee on Civil Rules, also emphasized the relationship of discovery to the ability to enforce congressional statutes:

Congress has elected to use the private suit, private attorneys-general as an enforcing mechanism for the anti-trust laws, the securities laws, environmental laws, civil rights and more. In the main, the plaintiff in these suits must discover his evidence from the defendant. Calibration of discovery is calibration of the level of enforcement of the social policy set by Congress.<sup>46</sup>

The drafters of the original Federal Rules emphatically reduced the importance of pleadings and largely left the disposition of cases to post-discovery settlement, summary judgment, or trial. To put it another way, the notice pleading requirement and the right to discovery were intermeshed in the entire Federal Rule structure. By altering the pleading rules, the Supreme Court has eliminated discovery for potentially meritorious cases and thwarted presumed congressional intent.

The third and fourth prongs of this assault on our democracy stem from the methods by which the change in pleading requirements took place. In some ways they are the most demonstrably undemocratic and thus the most egregious of the attacks. Congress granted the Supreme Court the power to promulgate Federal Rules of Civil Procedure through the Rules Enabling Act of 1934, which explicitly prescribed that if those rules were to cover both law and equity cases, they must be presented to Congress before they became law.<sup>47</sup> Since that time, Congress has mandated a number of additional steps that must be taken before Federal Rules become law, but the reporting

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<sup>45</sup> Paul D. Carrington, *Renovating Discovery*, 49 ALA. L. REV. 51, 54 (1997).

<sup>46</sup> Patrick Higginbotham, *Foreword*, 49 ALA. L. REV. 1, 4-5 (1997).

<sup>47</sup> Rules Enabling Act of 1934, Pub. L. No. 73-415, 48 Stat. 1064 ("Such united rules shall not take effect until they shall have been reported to Congress by the Attorney General at the beginning of a regular session thereof and until after the close of such session.").

requirement has remained.<sup>48</sup> These steps ensure that there is notice and opportunity for public comment and debate—transparency and accountability—before Federal Rules are changed.

Judge Anthony J. Scirica of the Third Circuit was, until recently, the Chair of the Executive Committee of the Judicial Conference, and for many years he served as both a member and chair of key committees in the federal rulemaking process. He explained why the Enabling Act process is so vital to our democracy as follows:

The primary responsibility of the Standing Rules Committee on Practice and Procedure is to implement the Rules Enabling Act. The Act was a brilliant solution to the making of procedural law. Described as a treaty between the legislative and judicial branches, it provides a dispassionate, neutral forum that allows procedural law to be written in a deliberate and thoughtful manner. Key members of the Executive Branch (such as the Deputy Attorney General and the Solicitor General) have seats on the Rules Committees. The openness mandated by Congress invites public comment, and new rules are enacted only after approval by the Judicial Conference, adoption by the Supreme Court, and after a [seven]-month interval while Congress considers whether to permit the rules to become law. All of this ensures the rigorous scrutiny and public review essential to establish the credibility and legitimacy of the rulemaking process.<sup>49</sup>

The Supreme Court in *Twombly* and *Iqbal* did not just interpret a few Federal Rules. It (1) replaced *the system of notice pleading* (of which broad discovery was a part) with something close to the nineteenth-century Code fact pleading and (2) turned a motion that was designed to deal with rare complaints that lacked a valid legal theory into a potent weapon to dismiss complaints that, without any discovery at all, strike judges as counterintuitive. In *Iqbal*, the Supreme Court also eliminated, in one paragraph and with no citation to prior case law, Federal Rule 9(b)'s clear language that "[m]alice, intent, knowledge, and other conditions of a person's mind may be alleged generally."<sup>50</sup> This drastic change, like the unacknowledged amendments of Rule 8(a) and Rule 12(b)(6), substantially adds to a plaintiff's pleading burden in employment discrimination and other civil rights cases in which the intent or knowledge of the defendant is difficult or impossible to substantiate without discovery.

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<sup>48</sup> See 28 U.S.C. §§ 2071, 2073, 2077 (2006); Catherine T. Struve, *The Paradox of Delegation: Interpreting the Federal Rules of Civil Procedure*, 150 U. PA. L. REV. 1099, 1115–19 (2002).

<sup>49</sup> Interview: *To Speak with One Clear Voice: The Executive Committee's Role in the Judiciary*, 41 THE THIRD BRANCH 1, 10–11 (Dec. 2009) (interview with Judge Anthony J. Scirica).

<sup>50</sup> See FED. R. CIV. P. 9(b); *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 129 S. Ct. 1937, 1954 (2009).

Such changes are precisely what the Supreme Court told lower courts could not be effected except through the Enabling Act process or by Congress.<sup>51</sup> In *Twombly* and *Iqbal*, the Supreme Court side-stepped not only congressional review, but the entire rulemaking process that Congress prescribed, including multiple steps designed to facilitate broad public participation. And the Supreme Court's rule changes apply to all civil cases.<sup>52</sup>

Finally, as we have noted, before *Twombly* and *Iqbal* some lower federal courts ignored the Supreme Court's repeated reminders about the proper process for amending Federal Rules by requiring more rigorous pleading in a broad range of cases.<sup>53</sup> Now the Court, in *Twombly* and *Iqbal*, has rewarded that lawlessness with its own acts of lawlessness, sidestepping the carefully crafted and democracy-enhancing Enabling Act process. Can it be a surprise that we have heard repeatedly that some lower courts are ignoring *Iqbal*—lawlessness cubed?

#### IV. WHAT SHOULD BE DONE?

Congress should reverse the new pleading requirements in *Twombly* and *Iqbal*. Bills introduced in both the Houses and Senate during the last Congress would have accomplished this goal.<sup>54</sup> The results of the November 2010 elections suggest that the passage of this legislation is now unrealistic. Nonetheless, legislative action is warranted to avoid the potential diminution of the Seventh Amendment right to trial by jury and to preserve the enacting legislature's expectation that laws relying on private enforcement will be enforced as they have been since 1938, until and unless Congress has the opportunity to consider some other system. Legislative action will thwart the Court's stark end-run of the entire Enabling Act process. If Congress later finds that some issue, such as the qualified immunity defense that was at play in *Iqbal* or the question of conspiracy in antitrust cases that was central to *Twombly*, requires more stringent pleading requirements, this can be addressed in legislation.<sup>55</sup> If judges, lawyers, legislators, or interest groups think that the pleading or discovery rules should be changed for all cases, such an amendment should go through the legislatively mandated process. These are the ways—congressional action or the Enabling Act process—in

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<sup>51</sup> See, e.g., *Swierkiewicz v. Sorema N.A.*, 534 U.S. 506, 515 (2002); *Leatherman v. Tarrant Cnty. Narcotics Intelligence & Coordination Unit*, 507 U.S. 163, 168 (1993).

<sup>52</sup> See Burbank, *supra* note 34.

<sup>53</sup> See *supra* note 8 and accompanying text.

<sup>54</sup> See Notice Pleading Restoration Act of 2010, S. 4054, 111th Cong. (2010); Notice Pleading Restoration Act of 2009, S. 1504, 111th Cong. (2009); Open Access to Courts Act of 2009, H.R. 4115, 111th Cong. (2009); 156 CONG. REC. S11,037-38 (daily ed. Dec. 22, 2010) (statement of Sen. Specter).

<sup>55</sup> Similar legislation has already been passed to reform securities and prisoner litigation. See Private Securities Litigation Reform Act of 1995, 15 U.S.C. § 78u-4 (2006); Prison Litigation Reform Act of 1995, 42 U.S.C. § 1997e (2006).

which our democracy has long since decided to handle such controversial questions about civil procedure and civil litigation.

There are at least three other ways in which the trend that has led to the drastic reduction of trials may yet be reversed. Two suggestions require that we rethink the transsubstantive assumption of the Federal Rules.<sup>56</sup> The third method, changing the attitudes of attorneys and judges, may be enhanced by the first two.

Our first proposal advocates categorical restrictions on discovery as part of a separate set of rules for “simple” cases. A number of states have such separate tracks,<sup>57</sup> as do England and Wales.<sup>58</sup> We are not prepared to specify all the details of such a track, an effort that should be informed by experience in jurisdictions that already employ tracking. We can, however, set forth a few central features of the proposal.

We would retain notice pleading as the norm, mindful that the claim to effective court access of those initiating simple cases is as strong as that of those initiating complex cases. But we share the view, which animates recent reforms in England and Wales, that proportionality should be a foundational principle underlying procedural rules.<sup>59</sup> For many simple cases, discovery of the breadth permitted by the existing Federal Rules is not proportional, and its availability is an invitation to economic oppression. Moreover, many observers of current federal practice have asserted that it is more expensive to litigate the same case in federal court than state court.<sup>60</sup> If true (and we believe it is), this is in part due not just to the many opportunities for extensive discovery but also to the multiple required steps that have been introduced to try to obviate the need for such discovery: mandatory disclosure, discovery conferences, pretrial conferences, and lists of witnesses and their expected testimony. The high cost of litigation dissuades some potential litigants with meritorious claims from commencing suit and forces some

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<sup>56</sup> There is nothing sacred about the transsubstantivity assumption. Congress has enacted specialized procedural rules for securities and prisoner litigation, among others. In 2009, the Final Report of the American College of Trial Lawyers Task Force on Discovery and the Institute for the Advancement of the American Legal System supported departures from transsubstantive procedural rules. AM. COLL. OF TRIAL LAWYERS TASK FORCE ON DISCOVERY & INST. FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF THE AM. LEGAL SYS., FINAL REPORT 4 (2009), available at <http://www.du.edu/legalinstitute/pubs/ACTL-IAALS%20Final%20Report%20Revised%204-15-09.pdf> (“The ‘one size fits all’ approach of the current federal and most state rules is useful in many cases but rulemakers should have the flexibility to create different sets of rules for certain types of cases so that they can be resolved more expeditiously and efficiently.”).

<sup>57</sup> Stephen N. Subrin, *The Limitations of Transsubstantive Procedure: An Essay on Adjusting the “One Size Fits All” Assumption*, 87 DENV. U. L. REV. 377, 394 nn. 74–75 (2010).

<sup>58</sup> See Civil Procedure Rules (CPR) 26.1(2) (U.K.) (“There are three tracks—(a) the small claims track; (b) the fast track; and (c) the multi-track.”).

<sup>59</sup> See CPR 1.1(2) (U.K.) (specifying as an overriding objective that “[d]ealing with a case justly includes . . . dealing with the case in ways which are proportionate—(i) to the amount of money involved; (ii) to the importance of the case; (iii) to the complexity of the issues; and (iv) to the financial position of each party”).

<sup>60</sup> See Subrin, *supra* note 57, at 389–90 n.56.

of those who do sue, and some defendants, into settlements that do not truly reflect the merits.

Less discovery for simple cases thus does not mean second-class justice for those cases. Rather, by reducing the breadth of discovery, we effectively reduce transaction costs and force lawyers to focus on the heart of the dispute. This and other features of the simple case track we advocate should enhance the realistic prospects of a trial and thus the possibility that settlements will do justice to the parties—in short, that the law will actually be enforced.

The rule makers have appeared to heed, even if faint-heartedly, the lessons of empirical studies that suggest the value of bright-line rules. In a series of amendments, they have introduced presumptive limits on the number of interrogatories and depositions and on the length of depositions.<sup>61</sup> We say “faint-heartedly” because such limits can be avoided by stipulation and court order.<sup>62</sup> Moreover, the limits are so high (i.e., ten depositions per side) that they are either irrelevant or an invitation to economic oppression in many lawsuits. This suggests to us that, in addition to tolerating very little pretrial case management and mandating virtually unchangeable discovery and trial schedules, the rules for a simple case track should include non-negotiable limits on the number of interrogatories and depositions and on the length of depositions. Dispensation from these rules should be available only by court order to prevent manifest injustice (or some similarly daunting standard). Some of those numbers might vary within the simple case track depending on whether the case is subject to mandatory disclosure.

The rule makers have not attempted any limit on document discovery presumably because they could not come up with any limiting principles that did not seem insupportably arbitrary. We acknowledge that document discovery is the hardest nut to crack. Progress should be possible, however, so long as we are guided by the proportionality principle, have the comfort of knowing that “simple” cases do not include those implicating the private enforcement of federal statutory norms (see below), and remember that broad discovery can be an instrument of economic oppression and a perverse incentive for lawyers billing by the hour. Document discovery under the Federal Rules required court approval (for good cause shown) prior to 1970.<sup>63</sup> In other common law countries that require disclosure or permit discovery of documents, but generally do not view private litigation as an enforcement tool, “the scope of discovery or disclosure is specified and lim-

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<sup>61</sup> For the current rules reflecting these amendments, see FED. R. CIV. P. 30(a)(2) (presumptive limit of ten depositions per side); *id.* R. 30(d)(1) (presumptive limit of deposition’s duration to “1 day of 7 hours”); *id.* at R. 33(a)(1) (presumptive limit of twenty-five written interrogatories).

<sup>62</sup> See *id.* at R. 30(a)(2); 30(d)(1); 33(a)(1).

<sup>63</sup> See FED. R. CIV. P. 34 (1948) (amended 1970) (eliminating good cause requirement).

ited.”<sup>64</sup> Precedent for requiring such specificity exists in this country in cases permitting direct discovery from abroad.<sup>65</sup>

From a narrow efficiency perspective, a rule requiring that document requests in simple track cases be specific may help to solve the problem of the cost of searching for responsive documents, but it may not be adequate for that purpose. One additional area that might be explored, but that we do not now advocate, is a time window keyed to an objective characteristic of the litigation (such as a designated number of years from the date when the allegedly harm-producing conduct took place). In addition, since the search costs in question may be most burdensome for electronic documents (particularly e-mail), unlike the Court in *Twombly*, which relied heavily on a twenty-year-old theoretical article on discovery that antedated three sets of amendments to the discovery rules,<sup>66</sup> we would acknowledge the e-discovery amendments recently made and seek empirical evidence concerning their effectiveness.

Objections often made to tracking proposals include the difficulty of drawing the lines necessary to sort cases into tracks and the likelihood of costly satellite litigation over decisions made. The answer to the latter, we believe, is to provide sufficiently objective and determinate criteria for the initial decision and not to permit any appeal. In addition, we would give exclusive responsibility for case assignment to federal judges who are dedicated (in part) to the task. Because there would be no appeal, magistrate judges probably could not be used for this purpose, but district judges serving in senior status might be ideal.

The task of defining “simple” cases is, to be sure, not simple. As indicated above, however, we conclude that cases implicating the private enforcement of public law should *not* be included because, among other things, broader discovery than that available in the simple case track may be necessary for adequate enforcement. Fortunately, some objective criteria for implementing this exclusion from the simple case track are to be found in statutory provisions for multiple damages and one-way pro-plaintiff fee-shifting. For more than a century Congress has used both of these kinds of provisions to promote private enforcement of federal statutes.<sup>67</sup> Assuming that private enforcement cases are protected, it may be sufficient to define the rest of the landscape in terms of the amount in controversy. Any such amount—for instance, cases involving less than \$500,000 are assigned to the

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<sup>64</sup> RULES OF TRANSNATIONAL CIVIL PROCEDURE, *in* PRINCIPLES OF TRANSNATIONAL CIVIL PROCEDURE 100, 131 (2006). *See id.* at 130 (Rule 22.1.1) (“Documents and other records of information that are specifically identified or identified within specifically defined categories”). Note, moreover, that in England and Wales, document disclosure does not apply to the small claims track, *see* CPR 31.1(2) (U.K.), and may be limited in cases on the fast track. *See* CPR 28.3, 31.5 (U.K.).

<sup>65</sup> *See, e.g.,* *Benton Graphics v. Uddeholm Corp.*, 118 F.R.D. 386 (D.N.J. 1987).

<sup>66</sup> *See* *Bell Atlantic Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 559, 560 n.6 (2007) (citing Frank Easterbrook, *Discovery as Abuse*, 69 B.U. L. REV. 635, 638–39 (1989)).

<sup>67</sup> *See* FARHANG, *supra* note 44, at 63–64.

simple case track—is arbitrary, but the line must be drawn somewhere. In order to prevent costly satellite litigation, the judge with responsibility for case assignment should have unreviewable discretion to determine whether the case as pleaded realistically exceeds the limit.

Congressional action will probably be necessary to overcome the traditional judicial hostility to a simple case track. Creation of such a track would almost certainly lead to more litigation in federal court—the so-called highway effect. Congress should ensure that the federal judiciary has resources that are adequate to the task, with “adequate” defined in a fashion that honors the best traditions of the federal courts rather than the bare minimum.

The creation of a separate track for simple cases would not address problems in complex cases of the sort that supposedly prevented the Court in *Twombly* from following precedent on pleading and relying on judicial management of the discovery process to ensure that discovery costs did not get out of control. The Court, however, ignored the discovery amendments after 1989 (the date of the theoretical article on which it chiefly relied),<sup>68</sup> most importantly the 2006 e-discovery amendments.<sup>69</sup> We would insist on empirical evaluation of the effectiveness of those amendments.

Our second proposal again abandons transsubstantive procedure, which is usually expressed in flexible, non-confining language designed to accommodate high-stakes, complex cases. We would encourage (or ask Congress to require) the rule makers to work with the bar to develop discovery protocols for the types of litigation thought (or, preferably, found in empirical studies) to impose the most burdensome discovery costs. The protocols would permit lawyers to inform their clients about what to expect in certain case types and would permit judges to compel or adjust the limitations in the protocol as necessary or appropriate for a particular case.<sup>70</sup> We do not believe that such an enterprise would be inconsistent with the Enabling Act, and even if it were, the Act could be amended, or the rule makers could propose protocols for adoption by Congress.

We turn finally to an area of reform that lies close to the heart of our concerns: summary judgment. This reform area forces one to look into the minds and hearts—the attitudes—of judges and lawyers. There is nothing obviously wrong with the governing Federal Rule 56, which attempts to identify those cases in which, after adequate time for discovery, a trial would be a waste of time and money and an invitation to irrational jury behavior.

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<sup>68</sup> See *supra* note 66 and accompanying text.

<sup>69</sup> See Richard L. Marcus, *E-Discovery Beyond the Federal Rules*, 37 U. BALT. L. REV. 321, 332 (2008) (discussing the 2006 e-discovery amendments).

<sup>70</sup> Prompted by the Advisory Committee on Civil Rules, plaintiff and defendant employment discrimination lawyers are currently working on discovery protocols for employment discrimination cases. See Memorandum re: Preliminary Report on Pattern Discovery Requests in Employment Cases Project, Oct. 20, 2010, in Advisory Committee on Civil Rules, Meeting, Nov. 15–16, 2010, 579–93, available at <http://www.uscourts.gov/uscourts/RulesAndPolicies/rules/Agenda%20Books/Civil/CV2010-11.pdf>.

Put otherwise, it is not clear how, at least on a transsubstantive basis, one could fashion a replacement that would prevent the mischief of ad hoc judgments that often appear arbitrary because of the amorphous nature of what constitutes an evidentiary foundation sufficient to support a jury finding. That mischief, confirmed by empirical study, consists of a supposedly uniform rule in fact operating in radically different fashion in different parts of the country and in different categories of cases,<sup>71</sup> coupled with evidence that in some cases the actual application of the rule has unfairly deprived litigants (usually plaintiffs) of a trial by jury or a trial in open court.<sup>72</sup>

Rules probably cannot restore summary judgment to its proper role in civil litigation, and they cannot restore trial in open court, jury trial, and respect for statutory norms and legislative policy to their historic, honored positions in American law. We need widespread change in attitudes.

If federal judges were given the resources necessary to do their jobs, aggressive deployment of trial-aborting procedural devices could no longer be justified by docket pressures and trials could no longer be regarded as failures. When everyone recognizes that procedure is power, invocations of “adjective law”<sup>73</sup> would no longer shield judges from criticism, including criticism in Congress, for privileging their personal policy preferences. That alone should help to induce greater judicial humility.

It would be better, however, if judges acknowledged the fragility of those preferences, which are often mere hunches uninformed by systematic empirical evidence and vulnerable to cultural biases.<sup>74</sup> Long ago, Justice Benjamin Cardozo famously put it this way:

Of the power of favor or prejudice in any sordid or vulgar or evil sense I have found no trace, not even the faintest among judges I have known. But every day there is borne in on me a new conviction of the inescapable relation between the truth without us and the truth within. The spirit of the age, as revealed in each of us, is too often only the spirit of the group in which accidents of birth or education or occupation or fellowship have given us a place. No effort or revolution of mind will overthrow utterly or at all times the empire of these subconscious loyalties.<sup>75</sup>

Before condemning a case to summary disposition on the basis of “judicial experience and common sense,” judges should heed the observation of the late, great Judge Richard Arnold: “Although you pick up a file and say,

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<sup>71</sup> See Burbank, *supra* note 4, at 618.

<sup>72</sup> See *id.* at 622.

<sup>73</sup> See Stephen B. Burbank, *Afterwords: A Response to Professor Hazard and a Comment on Marrese*, 70 CORNELL L. REV. 659, 662 (1985) (“Law reformers have long assured us that procedure is technical, details—in short, adjective law.”).

<sup>74</sup> See generally Dan M. Kahan, David A. Hoffman & Donald Braman, *Whose Eyes Are You Going to Believe? Scott v. Harris and the Perils of Cognitive Illiberalism*, 122 HARV. L. REV. 838 (2009).

<sup>75</sup> BENJAMIN N. CARDOZO, *THE NATURE OF THE JUDICIAL PROCESS* 174–75 (1921).



‘Well, there is a ninety-eight percent chance that this is frivolous,’ that does not mean you read only two percent of the file.”<sup>76</sup> Where the right to trial by jury is in question, judges should also heed Professor Burns’ caution that “[p]aradoxically, by giving particularity and empirical truth their due, the trial provides a strong critique of commonsense generalizations . . . . The trial provides a self-criticism of the overgeneralized ‘scripts’ within which much of our common sense is stored.”<sup>77</sup>

If trials became an economically realistic option in substantially more cases, lawyers could no longer hide behind settlement, and law schools would once again know that they were training students for the world as it is rather than as it was. Jury service, and the opportunity for direct participation in the democratic enterprise it provides, would be available to a larger number of citizens. If trials became an economically realistic option in substantially more cases, private law enforcement would be enhanced.

Civil litigation and democracy should be, and they can be, mutually reinforcing. The current state of destructive friction between them is a product of inadequate resources, the triumph of institutional and professional self-interest, and both legislative and judicial politics. Our citizens deserve better. The aspirations of our founders for trials in open court and jury trials are not obsolete, and neither is the duty of the judiciary, within constitutional limits, to respect clearly articulated statutory norms and clearly articulated legislative policy.

Maybe both of us have spent too long in ivory towers, giving us the luxury to dream. But is it too much to hope that in the not-too-distant future firms will no longer find it necessary to introduce their young lawyers to the courtroom through mock trials and that judges will enthusiastically embrace the notion “that the word ‘judge’ is a verb as well as a noun?”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Richard S. Arnold, *Money, or the Relations of the Judicial Branch with the Other Two Branches, Legislative and Executive*, 40 ST. LOUIS U. L.J. 19, 34 (1996).

<sup>77</sup> BURNS, *supra* note 15, at 35.

<sup>78</sup> Harp v. City, 161 F.R.D. 398, 402 (E.D. Ark. 1995).