Response to Heather Gerken's Federalism and Nationalism: Time for a Détente?

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RESPONSE TO HEATHER GERKEN’S *FEDERALISM AND NATIONALISM: TIME FOR A DÉTENTE?*

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I. INTRODUCTION

I want to start by offering my great thanks to the members of the St. Louis University Law Journal for this wonderful gathering; it is such a pleasure to be part of the Childress program this year. And on behalf of all of us, I want to share thanks as well with Heather Gerken, for giving us these wonderful ideas to collectively chew on. While some of the particulars are chewier for me than others, I strongly support the central thrust of her proposal—that federalism theory has come to the point at which it no longer makes sense, if it ever did, to characterize the grand theoretical debate as one between “federalism” and “nationalism.”

Heather’s work represents a critical component of an emerging consensus among contemporary federalism theorists that the old frameworks for thinking about interjurisdictional governance are broken. Among her many outstanding contributions to the field is scholarship that draws together the energy of so many sub-disciplinarians from within the greater federalism discourse. In her work, she brings together perspectives from election law, administrative law, health law, immigration law, environmental law, and others—including those from many of us here today. Often following independent paths, many of us have arrived in similar theoretical territory, including our recognition that the federal system depends as much on interjurisdictional integration as it does on jurisdictional separation (and in some respects, more so). Heather is right: it is time for those on both sides of the state-federal turf war to consider détente. For me, the important question is what the terms of that détente should look like, and that is what I’d like to talk about today.

Heather credits environmental federalism scholars, in particular, as early movers in this direction. So in my remarks today, I want to start with a few comments about the significance of environmental law’s position at the vanguard of this more dynamic understanding of federalism. I’ll note the increasing importance of “applied federalism” in the literature, and the special features of environmental governance that make it a wellspring of federalism controversy. Then I’ll share some important points in support of Heather’s call

5. Gerken, supra note 1, at 1004.
for détente, emphasizing the centrality of state-federal integration in American federalism and the defining importance of federalism’s ends in relation to its means. I’ll close with a few points of constructive disagreement, addressing the relationship between federalism process and principle, the meaning of federalism and nationalism, and the principal-agent metaphor of state-federal relations.

A. Lessons in Ambition and Humility

Before I do that, though, I also want to recognize another important part of Heather’s contribution to the discourse, to the profession in general, and certainly to me personally—which is the great generosity of her mentoring. Her support and encouragement of other scholars to think creatively and ambitiously against the grain has pushed the discourse forward as much as anything else, and I am especially grateful for that. And with that in mind, I thought I’d contextualize my remarks with a Heather Gerken mentoring anecdote that helps set up my more substantive comments about the relationship between environmental and constitutional law within the overall federalism discourse. The story bridges two separate vignettes in which Heather alternatively inspired me to be ambitious and reminded me to be humble (both lessons that I doubtless needed, and each in good time!).

My lesson in humility took place at an earlier federalism symposium that, like this one, honored Heather’s work. At the cocktails afterward, she shared an early version of the ideas that have come to fruition in her lecture today, because they harmonized with the insights of my own work. And indeed, I was very supportive of them—but perhaps insufficiently surprised. I recall thinking: yes, I agree that the zero-sum boxing match between the proponents of local and national power is a tired and ineffective way of understanding federalism (and I’ll say more about that later in my remarks). And yes, I thought; to push the discourse forward, we should focus on the ends of federalism rather than its means, where the ends represent the purposes of federalism, or the work that we want federalism to do for us in governance (and I’ll say more about that later, too).

And yes—this feels very much like what I’ve been arguing for some time, along with others from the dynamic federalism school that was already well-

6. See Gerken, supra note 1, at 997 (“I came to the debate late in the game, when it had reached that point that Robert McCloskey so vividly described in constitutional law—when everyone seems like aging boxing club members who have fought so long that they know each other’s moves and fight mostly to tire the other out.”); see also ROBERT G. MCCLOSKEY, THE MODERN SUPREME COURT 291 (1972).

7. See Ryan, supra note 2 (analyzing federalism controversy as a “tug of war” between competing federalism principles, describing an “interjurisdictional gray area” in which state-federal integration is both inevitable and appropriate, recognizing the unique contributions of
developed in environmental law\(^8\) . . . so why is it suddenly news? And it was in that moment, as she looked at me puzzled but patiently, that I suddenly understood that precious few in the pure constitutional law discourse (other than Heather Gerken!) had paid much attention to anything we had been saying. Thinking we had changed the field, perhaps we had just been echoing chambering within our own silo.

different branch actors in managing federalism, and proposing a theory of Balanced Federalism incorporating these insights).

Months later, after sharing a paper with Heather’s Federalism Seminar, we found ourselves again discussing the marginalization of environmental perspectives within the overall constitutional discourse. At that point, I wondered aloud if I should just stop writing in federalism altogether, and start talking to environmental scholars more likely to be interested in what I had to say. But in fully animated Gerken form, Heather insisted that I take the fight to constitutional law instead. She urged me to take on as my next article: “What Con Law Can Learn from Environmental Law,” modeled after her early efforts to school “con law” from the perspective of election law. And since it is wise to do what Heather Gerken advises, I thought I’d take the opportunity here to share a few preliminary thoughts about what constitutional law can indeed learn from environmental law—at least when it comes to federalism.

II. “WHAT CAN CON LAW LEARN FROM ENVIRONMENTAL LAW”

In preparing these remarks, I thought long and hard about what con law can learn from environmental law in general, and I actually came up with a pretty long list. Up at the top: more comfortable clothing! Especially footwear (and especially for women). Teamwork, too—since environmental law is interdisciplinary by nature, forcing its experts to consult other sources of understanding to solve “super wicked” regulatory problems. Etiquette may be a contender (at least if one compares the contrasting tones of the environmental and constitutional law professor list serves). But in all seriousness, if I were to choose one thing that constitutional law could truly learn from environmental law to make the federalism discourse more meaningful, there is a clear and simple choice—facts. Simple facts: simple, complicated, rich, contextualizing facts.

A. Federalism As Applied

Facts: substantive knowledge about a specific field of law and governance. How statutes actually work, and the way specific regulations actually fill in the gaps left over after statutes are enacted. And who it is that actually does everything to fit these pieces together and make them function in the real world of regulatory governance. What con law can learn from environmental law—and alternatively, health law and immigration law, and election law and so

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on—are the actual mechanics of federalism-sensitive governance.11 It’s from these realms that we understand what federalism really looks and feels like at the ground level. This is where we meet real American federalism—when we get out of the abstract plane of pure theory that Heather’s “aging boxing club members” have been operating in,12 and into the hurly burly of sweaty, sleeves-rolled-up efforts to manage interjurisdictional conflict and overlap.

Had constitutional law done this before environmental law (and now other disciplines) had forced it to, it would have noticed long ago that its predominant model of state-federal relations—at least among aging boxers—is bankrupt. I’ve previously identified this failed metaphor as the mythology of “zero-sum federalism,” a traditional view of the relationship between state and federal power that sees the two sides as locked in a bitter and antagonistic struggle over the line between them, where every victory for one side represents a loss for the other.13 (And in the traditional zero-sum model, it’s just these two sides; the relationship doesn’t go, as Heather has provocatively described, “all the way down!”14)

But those engaged with the facts know that this is not what American federalism looks like at all.15 Federalism does, in fact, go “all the way down,” involving parallel, embedded, and diagonal relationships among local, regional, and even international actors.16 And that line between state and federal power, if there is one, is more of an interface—a site of negotiation and interchange between local and national actors over how to allocate contested authority in contexts of legitimate jurisdictional overlap.17

Indeed, the growing gap between the zero-sum model and the messy reality of interjurisdictional governance reveals just how far the aging boxers’ discourse has drifted from a meaningful relationship with the regulatory world we are all presumably trying to improve. In my own work on negotiated federalism, I’ve tried to help close the gap by exploring the complex dynamics

11. See, e.g., Erin Ryan, Negotiating Federalism, 52 B.C. L. REV. 1, 24–73 (2011) [hereinafter Ryan, Negotiating Federalism]; RYAN, supra note 2, at 271–314 (both describing the mechanics of negotiated federalism in a variety of regulatory fields, including environmental law).
15. See RYAN, supra note 2, at 315–38; Ryan, Negotiating Federalism, supra note 11, at 74–102 (both reporting on the perspectives of practitioners of federalism-sensitive governance).
17. See RYAN, supra note 2, at 265–367; Ryan, Negotiating Federalism, supra note 11, at 24–73 (both describing the full enterprise of negotiated federalism).
of intergovernmental relations that more fully approximate the depth and complexity of American federalism. I’ve identified an array of means by which state and federal actors compete and collaborate through different forms of intergovernmental bargaining that belie the bright line of separation and the zero-sum game. But to understand these regulatory dynamics, one has to keep abreast of the way regulatory systems actually work. At some point, it seems, a few too many armchair federalism theorists forgot the importance of doing that.

Federalism is an as-applied science. It’s not enough to think in terms of pure theory; governance theory is tested and made meaningful only through its application in real contexts. Federalism theorists threaten our own relevance if we become too divorced from the mechanics of how federalism operates in specific contexts of governance. And so it is no accident that I came to my federalism work from a perspective grounded in the particulars of environmental law, and that Heather Gerken came to hers from election law, and Abbe Gluck from health law, and so on. We came to our various insights


19. See Ryan, supra note 2, at 265–367; Ryan, Negotiating Federalism, supra note 11, at 24–73 (both articulating a taxonomy of ten different ways that state and federal actors negotiate with one another, including conventional forms of bargaining, negotiations to reallocate authority, and joint policymaking bargaining).

20. Gerken, supra note 9, at 17; Abbe R. Gluck, Intrastatutory Federalism and Statutory Interpretation: State Implementation of Federal Law in Health Reform and Beyond, 121 YALE
about interjurisdictional governance based on our rich experiences with the way it operates in holistic regulatory fields. In fixating on the zero-sum game, the aging boxers’ debate lost touch with the ever-evolving textures of federalism-sensitive governance in specific points of application. Federalism theory needs content to be meaningful. The days of armchair federalism theory are over because armchair federalism theory is sterile.

B. The Canary in Federalism’s Coal Mine

Notably, when I started writing about federalism, I didn’t know that I was writing in “environmental federalism;” I thought it was just “federalism.” But I was propelled here by some provocative environmental federalism dilemmas, and it’s worth considering why environmental law so regularly provides them. As Heather recognizes, environmental law has been at the forefront of both federalism controversy and innovation, although other fields of law—marriage, marijuana, immigration, and health law, among others—are close on its heels.21 Still, many of the Supreme Court’s most famously divisive federalism cases are actually environmental cases.22 The New York v. United States23 anti-commandeering doctrine decision that commenced the Rehnquist Court’s New Federalism revival was actually an environmental case about interstate radioactive waste management.24 The same is true of many of the Court’s standing cases.25 So in trying to ascertain what con law can learn from environmental law, it may help to ask why environmental law is so often the canary-in-the-coal-mine of wider constitutional controversy?26

L.J., 534, 539 (2011); Ryan, Environmental Federalism’s Tug of War Within, supra note 18, manuscript at 13.

21. Ryan, Environmental Federalism’s Tug of War Within, supra note 18, manuscript at 1 & nn.1–11 (listing current federalism controversies in different areas of law).

22. Id. manuscript at 16–20 (discussing Supreme Court environmental cases that intersect with federalism, including Massachusetts v. EPA, 549 U.S. 497 (2007), Rapanos v. United States, 547 U.S. 715 (2006), and New York v. United States, 505 U.S. 144 (1992)).


24. See RYAN, supra note 2, at 215–64; Ryan, Federalism at the Cathedral, supra note 18, 25–64 (both discussing New York v. United States).

25. See Sierra Club v. Morton, 405 U.S. 727 (1972) (in a case about National Forest management, holding that standing under the Administrative Procedure Act is available only for individualized injuries); Lujan v. Nat’l Wildlife Fed’n, 497 U.S. 871 (1990) (in a case about mining on public lands, holding that a plaintiff must show an individualized injury within the specific “zone of interests” protected by the relevant environmental laws); Friends of the Earth, Inc., v. Laidlaw Envtl. Servs., 528 U.S. 167 (2000) (allowing standing to sue a polluter even after the initial suit was mooted by the voluntary cessation of the polluting activity, unless the defendant proves that the allegedly wrong behavior could not reasonably be expected to recur.).

26. See Ryan, Environmental Federalism’s Tug of War Within, supra note 18, manuscript at 4 (noting that environmental federalism decisions often prove to be the “canary in federalism’s coal mine”).
After pondering this question for so many years, it seems to me that the reason environmental law has been both a wellspring for creative interjurisdictional governance and a hotbed of federalism controversy is because it engages problems in which opposing claims to preeminently local or preemptively national authority are both, simultaneously, at their strongest.\textsuperscript{27} For example, environmental problems often involve some kind of a land use, and we all know that the regulation of land use is one of the most classically local forms of governing authority.\textsuperscript{28} There are good reasons for that.\textsuperscript{29} But environmental problems also involve boundary crossing, spillover harms that are the classic basis for centralized regulatory authority, to protect those at risk for harm who are outside the local jurisdiction and unrepresented in relevant governance decisions.\textsuperscript{30} In this respect, these opposing claims for exclusively local or national supremacy in environmental federalism dilemmas break down because everybody is so right. (And as a corollary, when everybody is so right, the other side seems especially wrong—accounting for the extreme controversy that attends environmental federalism dilemmas.) But when everyone is equally right and wrong, what does federalism tell us to do?\textsuperscript{31}

### III. POINTS OF CONVERGENCE: OF MEANS AND ENDS

This brings me to my most important point of agreement with Heather’s détente proposal, which is her rightful admonition that we shift our focus from the \textit{means} of federalism (how things should work) to the \textit{ends} of federalism (what we are working for)\textsuperscript{32}—because it is federalism’s ends that will ultimately tell us how things should work in these circumstances. Indeed, this is the very point that I have been trying to make, though less eloquently and successfully than Heather, since my very first federalism law review article, which became the basis for my later book, \textit{Federalism and the Tug of War Within}.\textsuperscript{33} In a nutshell, my argument has been that the only way to figure out how to allocate contested authority in a federal system is to figure out what

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Id.} manuscript at 11–20.
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{See} Young v. Am. Mini Theaters, Inc., 427 U.S. 50, 80 (1976) (Powell, J., concurring) (identifying zoning among “the most essential functions” of local government); \textit{RYAN, supra} note 2, at xii (noting that states administer local zoning laws).
\textsuperscript{29} \textit{See} \textit{RYAN, supra} note 2, at 50–59 (discussing the benefits of local autonomy in governance).
\textsuperscript{30} \textit{See id.} at 145–80; \textit{RYAN, Interjurisdictional Gray Area, supra} note 18, at 567–70 (both discussing interjurisdictional regulatory problems).
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{See Gerken, supra} note 1, at 1030 (noting that no one among the opposing interpretive camps has a monopoly on truth).
\textsuperscript{32} \textit{Id.} at 998.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{RYAN, supra} note 2, at xi–xii (drawing on \textit{RYAN, Interjurisdictional Gray Area, supra} note 18).
will best advance the underlying values of federalism. These underlying good governance values tell us what federalism is for. Protecting and enhancing these values in governance is the purpose of federalism—the work we ask federalism to do for us in channeling actual government toward our governance ideals. They are, in other words, the ends of federalism.

A. The Ends of Federalism

In Federalism and the Tug of War Within, I draw from the federalism literature and jurisprudence to extrapolate a set of four or five core values, some familiar and some less so. There is the value of checks and balances between local and national authority, which protects individuals against government overreaching or abdication by either level. Ideally, federalism helps foster accountability and transparency in governance, enhancing democratic participation at all points along the jurisdictional spectrum. Federalism fosters diversity, innovation, and interjurisdictional competition by protecting local autonomy while affirming central authority to resolve collective action problems, police spillover harms, and vindicate core constitutional promises of individual rights. And last but not least, though perhaps least recognized, is the problem-solving synergy that federalism enables us to harness between the distinctive capacities of different governmental actors—the kind of governance that can only happen, or that happens best, at the local, regional, state, or federal level, and among the various branches of government—for getting at the different parts of complex, interjurisdictional problems that can’t be resolved at any one level or by any one actor alone. Environmental law has lots of problems like this, which has surely shepherded my thinking along these lines.

So these values are the ends of federalism—the purposes to which federalism should aspire, and the touchstone for constitutional interpreters

34. Id.
35. Id.
36. Id. at 34–67 (identifying four values, in which the value of central authority is partnered with problem-solving synergy); Ryan, Environmental Federalism’s Tug of War Within, supra note 18, manuscript at 6–9 (adding more explicit consideration of the value of centralized oversight as a fifth, independent value).
37. RYAN, supra note 2, at 39–44.
38. Id. at 44–50.
39. Id. at 50–59.
40. Id. at 59–66; See Ryan, Environmental Federalism’s Tug of War Within, supra note 18, manuscript at 6–7 (discussing the value of centralized oversight).
41. RYAN, supra note 2, at 59–66.
42. See Ryan, Environmental Federalism’s Tug of War Within, supra note 18, manuscript at 11–20 (discussing the unique collision of federalism values in environmental law and the resulting interjurisdictional challenges for environmental governance).
when making federalism-sensitive governance decisions. The problem for federalism-sensitive governance, of course, is that while these are all individually wonderful values in and of themselves, it can be very hard to always satisfy all of them, all together, at the same time. There are inherent, inevitable tensions among them, which the jurisprudence has not always recognized. Some are quite obvious—for example, the open tension between localism and nationalism values that, in large part, animates the aging boxers’ debate that Heather is trying here to disband. But the network of federalism values are suffused with other, less obvious tensions as well—for example, between checks and accountability. After all, if we only cared about accountability, we’d do better with a single sovereign controlling a fully centralized system (rather than our confusing system of dual state and federal sovereignty), because it’s easy to know who is responsible for bad policy if there is only one policymaker! But we reject that model because it would entirely foreclose the checks and balances (and interjurisdictional synergy) for which we are willing to make tradeoffs against accountability values.

B. The Tug of War Within

The problem for federalism-sensitive governance is that figuring out how to work through all this tension can be really, really hard. Protecting one value imposes costs on another, but adjusting for that creates problems for still another. That’s why federalism dilemmas generate so much controversy—there are multiple, sometimes equally compelling considerations, all operating at once. That’s why the Supreme Court’s federalism jurisprudence has vacillated so much over time—as the Court alternatively picks out one value to privilege and then shifts to another that the previous approach has left vulnerable. And for what it’s worth, this is why federalism theory is so important. At the end of the day, it’s all we’ve got to help us conceptualize our way through this particularly complex constitutional maze—which is about so much more than just states’ rights versus nationalism.

43. Id. at 6–9; See RYAN, supra note 2, at 34–67 (discussing the fundamental federalism values and the inevitable tensions between them).
44. See Gerken, supra note 1, at 999–1001.
45. See RYAN, supra note 2, at 47–48 (discussing the conflict between the accountability value and other core federalism values).
46. See id. at 66–67 (discussing the conflicting federalism values of checks and balances, accountability and participation, local innovation and competition, and state-federal problem-solving synergy).
47. See id. at 68–104 (discussing the historical pendulum swing amongst the competing values).
48. See id. at 368–72 (discussing the values competition within good federalism-sensitive governance and the need for federalism theory that is more sensitive to these dynamics).
For this reason, I have encouraged us to think about federalism less as a matter of the contest between states’ rights and federal power, or that between judicial or political safeguards, or even dueling conceptions of original intent—and to think about it more as our ongoing response to the inevitable conflicts that play out among federalism’s core principles.49 As noted, my own federalism scholarship identifies that response as one heavily mediated by mechanisms of governance that enable structured forms of consultation, competition, compromise, and other forms of joint decision-making across jurisdictional lines. These examples of “negotiated federalism”—some obvious, some less so—engage perspectives from up and down the jurisdictional spectrum and across the different branches of government, ideally to enable federalism-sensitive governance to benefit from the unique competency that each brings to the decision-making table.50

C. Balanced Federalism

If I had more time, I would sketch out how my own theory of Balanced Federalism facilitates this dynamic allocation of responsibility, capitalizing on the different kinds of substantive expertise, legal authority, governing competency, and other forms of regulatory capacity that attach to executive, legislative, and judicial actors at the local, state, and federal levels.51 The Balanced Federalism model splits some of the differences that provoke conflict in the traditional federalism debate. It is not pre-committed to preferring regulatory authority at either the state or the federal level, nor is it fully committed to either judicial or political safeguards.52 In arbitrating between these camps, the Balanced Federalism approach takes as its touchstone the good governance values at the heart of federalism.53 The right direction is the one that keeps us most faithful to our ability to deliver holistically on these values. Everything else in the administration of federalism is just the means to these ends.

The details of Balanced Federalism are supportive of Heather’s vision here—I emphasize the value of procedural consensus in the absence of substantive consensus, relying on bilaterally negotiated political safeguards subject to limited judicial review for bargaining abuses—but they are well

49. Id. at xi.
50. See Ryan, supra note 2, at 265–367; see, e.g., Ryan, Negotiating Federalism, supra note 11 (both discussing various types of intergovernmental bargaining and the different ways they capitalize on expertise within different levels and branches of governance).
51. See Ryan, supra note 2, at xxvi–xxix, 181–83, 368–72 (discussing the theoretical and practical implications of Balanced Federalism).
52. Id. at xxvi–xxvii.
53. Id. at 368–72.
developed in my book, so I’ll spend the rest of my time sharing the points on which she and I disagree.

IV. POINTS OF DIVERGENCE: FALSE DICHOTOMIES

As is probably clear by now, there is a lot of harmony between our approaches. In fact, the biggest difference between the vision Heather articulates here and the approach I’ve taken in my own scholarship is that I may take it even further than she does—as evidenced by the three points that I raise for critique. To be fair, some of these are more quibbles than conflicts, and some may come down to semantics—but the vocabulary we use to talk about these things is important. So with that in mind, I offer these three suggestions for the ideas going forward.

A. Process and Principle

As an initial matter, the draft on which my comments were originally premised had asserted that this new conception of state-federal relations is premised on “practice, not presumptions” and “processes, not principle”—and there is clear truth in the statement. As poetic as it is, however, it may have been a little too glib—eliding the complex relationship between process and principle in federalism theory. To her credit, Heather later modified the relevant phrase to “practice as well as presumptions; processes as well as principles.” Yet because others make a similar point, I preserve my original observation that the “process, not principle” view of federalism threatens to miss a critical part of the fuller story we are all telling.

The new wave of scholarship supporting détente is, indeed, cognizant of the importance of process in American federalism, especially process that facilitates the integration of local and national perspective in federalism-sensitive governance. My scholarly interest in intergovernmental bargaining as a source of procedural safeguards places my own work squarely in the camp of process-oriented federalism theory. But as much as I believe that American federalism is largely about fluidity and exchange and process, I also

54. Id. at 339–67 (discussing the interpretative potential of qualifying intergovernmental bargaining).
56. Gerken, supra note 1, at 999 (“It is premised on practice as well as presumptions; processes as well as principles; routines as well as regulations.”).
57. See Gerken, supra note 4, at 1893, 1895 (discussing the importance of the interaction between the state and federal governments); see also Ryan, Navigating the Separation of Powers, supra note 4, at 22–23 (describing new federalism scholarship better probing the relationship between process and principle).
58. See RYAN, supra note 2, at 339–67 (discussing the use of governance processes as interpretive criteria).
think that it’s more than just an empty vessel. The purpose of all this process is to advance the ends of federalism, which I view as the principles of good governance that federalism is designed to yield—the federalism values I’ve been describing here.

And so—as Heather’s final draft affirms—I don’t think we can divorce process from principles, even in the context of process-sensitive federalism theory. These are probably a different set of principles than the ones the aging boxers have been battling over (which may explain the passing assertion in the original draft). But in my view, we can only evaluate whether the process is successful by the degree to which it helps us accomplish these principles in governance. In the end, the job of federalism theory is to help us ensure that the governance processes we employ accomplish the principles we are aiming for in that governance.

It may be that when this issue arises, the real sticking point is simply the presentation of the process-principle question as an either/or dichotomy—when in fact, the most interesting thing about process and principle in federalism is the under-appreciated association between them. As I’ve shown in previous work, many of the federalism principles that matter most to us—checks and balances, accountability and transparency, synergy, and so on—are, themselves, procedural values. For example, we often think of checks and balances as yielding a substantive value—the protection of individuals at the mercy of regulatory whim—but checks and balances inherently imply the process of counterbalancing political power by which that protection is conferred.

The same is true for the accountability value, which is essentially a procedural constraint for ensuring democratic participation—which is, itself, a process. Even local autonomy is a process value: it describes how decision-making should take place (at the local level), rather than what the content of those decisions should be. And we like local autonomy, because we hope it will foster the additional process-principles of innovation and competition. We may casually think of these federalism values as substantive principles, but in fact, they can only be actualized procedurally. It is in this sense that observers are sometimes right to assert that federalism is more about process than principle. My friendly amendment is to point out that an even better way of looking at this is to understand that they are often one and the same thing.

59. See Ryan, Navigating the Separation of Powers, supra note 4, at 22–23 (arguing that principle, not just process, is essential to federalism).
60. See Ryan, supra note 2, at 347–49; Ryan, Negotiating Federalism, supra note 11, at 110–13 (both discussing the procedural constraints implied by federalism values).
61. Ryan, supra note 2, at 347; Ryan, Negotiating Federalism, supra note 11, at 111.
62. Ryan, supra note 2, at xxx.
63. Id. 
Indeed, the federalism discourse has overemphasized “political” safeguards at the expense of the more important feature distinguishing them, at least in the federalism context, which is the fact that they are really functioning as “procedural” safeguards.\(^6\) To this end, in Federalism and the Tug of War Within, and a precursor article, Negotiating Federalism, which Heather kindly credits for jumpstarting some of this discussion,\(^6\) I propose additional theoretical support for political federalism constraints on grounds that political branch bargaining can sometimes better advance the underlying principles of federalism by engaging the parties of interest in processes of consultation and compromise that advance these process-oriented values better than unilateral judicial or statutory decree.\(^6\) My proposal limits judicial review over the substance of negotiated federalism decisions, but it allows for judicial review to police for the kinds of procedural abuses that violates these principles—appropriately focusing constitutional intervention at the points that most reflect these procedural constitutional values.\(^6\)

B. Federalism and Nationalism

My second point of critique targets the seemingly mutually exclusive vocabulary of “federalism” vs. “nationalism” around which the Détente piece is centered.\(^6\) I certainly understand its progeny in Heather’s earlier work,\(^6\) but the dichotomy doesn’t resonate with me by the end of the piece. It inadvertently reinforces the zero-sum idea that the important divide within federalism theory is between advocates for states’ right and advocates for national power. While I understand that this is where the aging boxers’ debate begins, it’s important to end a piece calling for détente within the federalism debate with greater recognition that “federalism” is not—and never has been—synonymous with states’ rights.\(^7\) And for that same reason, “federalism” in not

\(^6\). See id. at 347–56; Ryan, Negotiating Federalism, supra note 11, at 110–21 (both describing how federalism values can operate as procedural constraints in certain contexts).

\(^6\). Gerken, supra note 1, at 1004 n.22; Gerken, Federalism All the Way Down, supra note 14, at 20 n.50, 21 n.58.

\(^6\). See Ryan, supra note 2, at 339–67; see also Ryan, Negotiating Federalism, supra note 11, at 102–35.

\(^6\). Ryan, supra note 2, at xxx.

\(^6\). Gerken, supra note 1, at 1000–01 (distinguishing the “federalism” and “nationalism” camps).

\(^6\). Jessica Bulman-Pozen & Heather K. Gerken, Uncooperative Federalism, 118 YALE L.J. 1256, 1258–59 (2009); Gerken, supra note 4, at 1917.

\(^6\). See Ryan, supra note 2, at xi (arguing that federalism is not best understood as a battle between federal power and states’ rights but rather as a balance between competing underlying values).
in opposition to “nationalism.” Using this dualistic opposition perpetuates the ideological fallacy that the dynamic federalism perspective has exploded.\(^{71}\)

Of course, Heather is legitimately using this vocabulary, because it pre-exists the conversation we are having today. Though wrongheaded, it is already entrenched within the discourse, and so it may be useful to bridge the new scholarly conversation to the old. Especially at the beginning of the piece, she uses this terminology in the spirit of building common ground, in order to lead us away from the tired old boxing match between ideological opponents. But as the piece progresses, I’d encourage her to help push the discourse forward by reconceptualizing the relationship between local and national power within the federal system in more accurate terms. A better way of talking about it, after acknowledging the terminology of the old boxing match that she is trying to end, is to rely more heavily on the terminology of devolution and centralization that she uses elsewhere in the piece.\(^{72}\)

The dynamics of devolution and centralization seem to better capture what she means by federalism and nationalism. Each term emphasizes a location of primary decision-making authority within a federal system of dual sovereignty, rather than misaligning them with larger and sentimentally charged conceptions of the federal system or nationhood itself. A federal system anticipates both state and federal power, both local and national decision-making.\(^{73}\) The United States is a federal nation. Proponents of “federalism,” by definition, favor centralized decision-making in many contexts; otherwise they would be proponents of a confederal system, such as the failed Articles of Confederation, or secessionists.\(^{74}\) Indeed, federalism versus nationalism, while an accepted one, is a false dichotomy. Federalism isn’t about states’ rights or nationalism—it’s about good governance. Once again, it’s about the ends, the principles, the values of federalism that we’ve been talking about. And since Heather’s piece is so effective at drawing the discourse toward this new understanding, it would be worth further shifting away from the old, zero-sum vocabulary by the end of the piece, if not earlier.

C. Principals and Agents

My last point of critique also touches on semantics, but extends into deeper theoretical territory. For related reasons, the principal-agent vocabulary of the piece doesn’t work for me,\(^{75}\) and I encourage Heather to reconsider how she deploys it in this piece. Of course, her use of the principal-agent metaphor

\(^{71}\) Id. at xxvi–xxvii.
\(^{72}\) See Gerken, supra note 1, at 1001–07 (discussing devolution and decentralization).
\(^{73}\) RYAN, supra note 2, at 7–11.
\(^{74}\) Id. at 58–59.
\(^{75}\) See Gerken, supra note 1, at 1010 (discussing state power as the “power of the servant” and describing it as stemming from “a principal-agent relationship”).
makes perfect sense in light of her previous work, including *Uncooperative Federalism* and other landmark forays into the intricacies of local-state-federal relations. But there are considerable problems with its role in this particular piece, ranging from the strategic to the substantive.

As an initial matter, her reliance on principal-agent language here creates problems at the level of the communication strategy. Casting the states as agents of a national principal may not be the best selling point in an article trying to persuade the proponents of states’ rights to lay down their arms. It has the potential to make her call for détente seem more like a Trojan Horse, at least from the perspective of the aging boxers on that side of the fight! To be fair, the metaphor holds some important truth, reflecting the role of many states operating in programs of cooperative federalism within the constitutional ether of federal supremacy. But it may undermine Heather’s credibility as the ambassador of a reasonable middle ground approach, because it seems to reinforce the old power dynamics that other parts of her argument are seemingly dismantling.

Moreover, while the metaphor accurately portrays some of the dynamics within cooperative federalism, it misses other elements of the relationship that are hugely important in the overall context of state-federal relations. For example, it elides one of the most important characteristics of American federalism more generally, which is the feature of “regulatory backstop” between local and national authority over history. Regulatory backstop refers to the way that sovereign authority on both levels is used to “backstop” one another’s failures in protecting individual rights or advancing overall societal welfare. Most famously in the civil rights context, the federal government backstopped failures by the states to protect the rights of women and minorities during the 1960s. Today, state actors are backstopping regulatory failures by the federal government to protect the rights of the LGBT community.

Regulatory backstop has proved a crucial feature of environmental federalism as well. The federal government backstopped state failures to protect air and water quality during the 1970s, and today, state and local governments are backstopping federal failures to meaningfully grapple with climate policy. Similar examples have arisen in countless other contexts,

76. Bulman-Pozen & Gerken, supra note 69, at 1262–63, 1265.
77. See Ryan, Negotiating Federalism, supra note 11, at 20–37 (describing the mechanics of environmental programs of cooperative federalism).
78. See RYAN, supra note 2, at 42–43 (discussing the regulatory backstop features associated with checks and balances).
79. Id.
80. Id. at xxviii–xxix; see id. at 89–91 (discussing evolutions in federalism theory at the time of the Civil Rights Movement).
81. Id. at xxvii–xxviii; see id. at 167–76 (discussing regulatory backstop in the context of climate governance).
ranging from eminent domain reform to marijuana policy to species protection. In these situations, the states are emphatically not acting as agents of the federal principal; they are acting in direct competition. So there is a big theoretical problem in the principal-agent account of state-federal relations. It misses too much of the reality in the relationship to be useful, at least as it stands in the piece today.

V. CONCLUDING PROPOSAL: THE INVERTED PRINCIPAL-AGENT RELATIONSHIP

All that said, I’d like to close by proposing a way that the principal-agent vocabulary might still work—if we expand the lens. Specifically, we should consider how much more powerful the metaphor becomes if we include all applicable variations on the theme. To get closer to the reality of the state-federal relationship, we should account not only for the principal-agent relationships that Heather has already identified—in which the states acts as agents of the federal principal—but also those instances in which the federal government operates as an agent of the state principal.

Examples of this inverted principal-agent relationship may be fewer in number given the role of federal supremacy, but even within some programs of cooperative federalism, federal supremacy has been purposefully waived to approximate an inverted principal-agent relationship between state and federal actors. In environmental law, for example, both the Coastal Zone Management Act and the Clean Water Act create circumstances in which the federal government must win state approval of federal plans in an area of law clearly governed by federal commerce authority. Countless other statutes also carve out space for state leadership on issues that could have been subject to federal preemption, including those Abbe Gluck explained earlier today.

In other cases, federal agency to the state principle is a function of clear doctrinal principle. For example, under the Erie doctrine of federal civil procedure, federal courts apply state laws to resolve state-law based disputes

82. Id. at xxviii, 313 (eminent domain reform), 311–12 (marijuana policy), 292–94 (species protection).

83. See Ryan, Environmental Federalism’s Tug of War Within, supra note 18, manuscript at 29–31 (discussing structural privileging of state choices in the context of water allocation, the Coastal Zone Management Act, and Clean Water Act). See also Ryan, supra note 2, at 295–96 (discussing inverted federal supremacy in hydroelectric and offshore drilling licensing); id. at 302–08 (discussing the Coastal Zone Management Act’s limited waiver of federal supremacy). See also Ryan, Negotiating Federalism, supra note 11, at 48–50 (discussing federal licensing decisions); id. at 59–62 (discussing the Coastal Zone Management Act).

84. Id.

that are in federal court on diversity jurisdiction. The federal government may also act as an agent of state law when collaborating in criminal law enforcement, disaster relief, and the ratification and enforcement of interstate compacts. Many areas of federal law implicitly rely on state law to be intelligible—for example, federal tax and bankruptcy laws that rely on state law definitions of property and family relations. The implementation and administration of those laws puts federal actors in the position of faithfully carrying out policy decisions made by separately acting state actors, wielding power only as the servant of the state master.

Finally, if we move beyond the doctrinal sphere to the political, we see the federal government acting as an agent of state interests all the time. This happens whenever the states use available channels within the political process to persuade Congress to pass federal laws that are tailored to state interests, such as federal block grants, stimulus packages, and financial services legislation. It happens whenever they persuade federal agencies to implement statutes in ways that address state concerns, as took place during different iterations of the REAL ID Act. It happens within programs of cooperative federalism that are redesigned to allow states to compete directly with federal standards, such as the Clean Air Act’s mechanism for setting motor vehicle emissions. It happens whenever state and federal agents work together in the contexts where both sides have overlapping regulatory interests and obligations, in all sorts of less formal ways that nevertheless make up the fabric of the “hurly burly” of federalism-sensitive governance.

86. Erie R.R. Co. v. Thompkins, 304 U.S. 64, 78 (1938).
87. See Ryan, supra note 2, at 17–33 (discussing disaster relief and the federal response to Hurricane Katrina); id. at 215–25 (discussing state-led legislative bargaining over the Low Level Radioactive Waste Policy Act in detail); id. at 286–87 (discussing criminal law enforcement); id. at 290–92 (discussing the federal ratification of interstate water and radioactive waste compacts). See also Ryan, Negotiating Federalism, supra note 11, at 31–33 (adding more detail on state-federal relations in criminal law enforcement).
88. See Ryan, supra note 2, at 111 (discussing definitional overlap between federal bankruptcy and state property law).
89. Id. at 283–84 (discussing federal stimulus and financial services reform legislation); id. at 289 (discussing energy independence block grants). See also Ryan, Negotiating Federalism, supra note 11, at 29–31 (adding more detail on stimulus and financial services); id. at 39 (energy independence block grants).
90. See Ryan, supra note 2, at 301–02; Ryan, Negotiating Federalism, supra note 11, at 56–58 (both discussing the REAL ID Act).
91. See Ryan, supra note 2, at 308–10; Ryan, Negotiating Federalism, supra note 11, at 65–69 (both discussing the Clean Air Act’s iterative federalism mechanism for setting motor vehicle emissions).
Much of the scholarly work that Heather engages looks at exactly the way federal lawmaking becomes a tool or agent of state priorities.92 Indeed, one political scientist recently offered a compelling account of how surprisingly successful states are at wielding their influence over federal lawmaking within the political process.93 If Heather expands the principle-agent metaphor to encompass this additional dimension, I think that would be a compelling addition to an already compelling body of work.

Either way, the field is better for her work, and we should all be grateful for her efforts to bring this much-needed détente to the discourse.
