

4.2: The Commerce Clause

Learning Objectives

By the end of this section, you will be able to:

- Name the specific clause through which Congress has the power to regulate commerce. What, specifically, does this clause say?
- Explain how early decisions of the Supreme Court interpreted the scope of the commerce clause and how that impacted the legislative proposals and programs of Franklin Delano Roosevelt during the Great Depression.
- Describe both the wider use of the commerce clause from World War II through the 1990s and the limitations the Supreme Court imposed in *Lopez* and other cases.

First, turn to Article I, Section 8. The commerce clause gives Congress the exclusive power to make laws relating to foreign trade and commerce and to commerce among the various states. Most of the federally created legal environment springs from this one clause: if Congress is not authorized in the Constitution to make certain laws, then it acts unconstitutionally and its actions may be ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. Lately, the Supreme Court has not been shy about ruling acts of Congress unconstitutional.

Here are the first five parts of Article I, Section 8, which sets forth the powers of the federal legislature. The commerce clause is in boldface. It is short, but most federal legislation affecting business depends on this very clause:

Section 8

[Clause 1] The Congress shall have Power To lay and collect Taxes, Duties, Imposts and Excises, to pay the Debts and provide for the common Defence and general Welfare of the United States; but all Duties, Imposts and Excises shall be uniform throughout the United States;

[Clause 2] To borrow Money on the credit of the United States;

[Clause 3] To regulate Commerce with foreign Nations, and among the several States, and with the Indian Tribes;

[Clause 4] To establish a uniform Rule of Naturalization, and uniform Laws on the subject of Bankruptcies throughout the United States;

[Clause 5] To coin Money, regulate the Value thereof, and of foreign Coin, and fix the Standard of Weights and Measures;

Early Commerce Clause Cases

For many years, the Supreme Court was very strict in applying the commerce clause: Congress could only use it to legislate aspects of the movement of goods from one state to another. Anything else was deemed local rather than national. For example, In *Hammer v. Dagenhart*, decided in 1918, a 1916 federal statute had barred transportation in interstate commerce of goods produced in mines or factories employing children under fourteen or employing children fourteen and above for more than eight hours a day. A complaint was filed in the US District Court for the Western District of North Carolina by a father in his own behalf and on behalf of his two minor sons, one under the age of fourteen years and the other between fourteen and sixteen years, who were employees in a cotton mill in Charlotte, North Carolina. The father's lawsuit asked the court to enjoin (block) the enforcement of the act of Congress intended to prevent interstate commerce in the products of child labor.

The Supreme Court saw the issue as whether Congress had the power under the commerce clause to control interstate shipment of goods made by children under the age of fourteen. The court found that Congress did not. The court cited several cases that had considered what interstate commerce could be constitutionally regulated by Congress. In *Hipolite Egg Co. v. United States*, the Supreme Court had sustained the power of Congress to pass the Pure Food and Drug Act, which prohibited the introduction into the states by means of interstate commerce impure foods and drugs. *Hipolite Egg Co. v. United States*, 220 US 45 (1911). In *Hoke v. United States*, the Supreme Court had sustained the constitutionality of the so-called White Slave Traffic Act of 1910, whereby the transportation of a woman in interstate commerce for the purpose of prostitution was forbidden. In that case, the court said that Congress had the power to protect the channels of interstate commerce: "If the facility of interstate transportation can be taken away from the demoralization of lotteries, the debasement of obscene literature, the contagion of diseased cattle or persons, the

impurity of food and drugs, the like facility can be taken away from the systematic enticement to, and the enslavement in prostitution and debauchery of women, and, more insistently, of girls.” *Hoke v. United States*, 227 US 308 (1913).

In each of those instances, the Supreme Court said, “[T]he use of interstate transportation was necessary to the accomplishment of harmful results.” In other words, although the power over interstate transportation was to regulate, that could only be accomplished by prohibiting the use of the facilities of interstate commerce to effect the evil intended. But in *Hammer v. Dagenhart*, that essential element was lacking. The law passed by Congress aimed to standardize among all the states the ages at which children could be employed in mining and manufacturing, while the goods themselves are harmless. Once the labor is done and the articles have left the factory, the “labor of their production is over, and the mere fact that they were intended for interstate commerce transportation does not make their production subject to federal control under the commerce power.”

In short, the early use of the commerce clause was limited to the movement of physical goods between states. Just because something might enter the channels of interstate commerce later on does not make it a fit subject for national regulation. The production of articles intended for interstate commerce is a matter of local regulation. The court therefore upheld the result from the district and circuit court of appeals; the application of the federal law was enjoined. Goods produced by children under the age of fourteen could be shipped anywhere in the United States without violating the federal law.

From the New Deal to the New Frontier and the Great Society: 1930s–1970

During the global depression of the 1930s, the US economy saw jobless rates of a third of all workers, and President Roosevelt’s New Deal program required more active federal legislation. Included in the New Deal program was the recognition of a “right” to form labor unions without undue interference from employers. Congress created the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) in 1935 to investigate and to enjoin employer practices that violated this right.

In *NLRB v. Jones & Laughlin Steel Corporation*, a union dispute with management at a large steel-producing facility near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, became a court case. In this case, the NLRB had charged the Jones & Laughlin Steel Corporation with discriminating against employees who were union members. The company’s position was that the law authorizing the NLRB was unconstitutional, exceeding Congress’s powers. The court held that the act was narrowly constructed so as to regulate industrial activities that had the potential to restrict interstate commerce. The earlier decisions under the commerce clause to the effect that labor relations had only an indirect effect on commerce were effectively reversed. Since the ability of employees to engage in collective bargaining (one activity protected by the act) is “an essential condition of industrial peace,” the national government was justified in penalizing corporations engaging in interstate commerce that “refuse to confer and negotiate” with their workers. This was, however, a close decision, and the switch of one justice made this ruling possible. Without this switch, the New Deal agenda would have been effectively derailed.

The Substantial Effects Doctrine: World War II to the 1990s

Subsequent to *NLRB v. Jones & Laughlin Steel Corporation*, Congress and the courts generally accepted that even modest impacts on interstate commerce were “reachable” by federal legislation. For example, the case of *Wickard v. Filburn*, from 1942, represents a fairly long reach for Congress in regulating what appear to be very local economic decisions (Section 4.6.2).

Wickard established that “substantial effects” in interstate commerce could be very local indeed! But commerce clause challenges to federal legislation continued. In the 1960s, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was challenged on the ground that Congress lacked the power under the commerce clause to regulate what was otherwise fairly local conduct. For example, Title II of the act prohibited racial discrimination in public accommodations (such as hotels, motels, and restaurants), leading to the famous case of *Katzbach v. McClung* (1964).

Ollie McClung’s barbeque place in Birmingham, Alabama, allowed “colored” people to buy takeout at the back of the restaurant but not to sit down with “white” folks inside. The US attorney sought a court order to require Ollie to serve all races and colors, but Ollie resisted on commerce clause grounds: the federal government had no business regulating a purely local establishment. Indeed, Ollie did not advertise nationally, or even regionally, and had customers only from the local area. But the court found that some 42 percent of the supplies for Ollie’s restaurant had moved in the channels of interstate commerce. This was enough to sustain federal regulation based on the commerce clause. *Katzbach v. McClung*, 379 US 294 (1964).

For nearly thirty years following, it was widely assumed that Congress could almost always find some interstate commerce connection for any law it might pass. It thus came as something of a shock in 1995 when the Rehnquist court decided *U.S. v. Lopez*. Lopez had been convicted under a federal law that prohibited possession of firearms within 1,000 feet of a school. The law was part of a twenty-year trend (roughly 1970 to 1990) for senators and congressmen to pass laws that were tough on crime. Lopez’s lawyer

admitted that Lopez had had a gun within 1,000 feet of a San Antonio school yard but challenged the law itself, arguing that Congress exceeded its authority under the commerce clause in passing this legislation. The US government's Solicitor General argued on behalf of the Department of Justice to the Supreme Court that Congress was within its constitutional rights under the commerce clause because education of the future workforce was the foundation for a sound economy and because guns at or near school yards detracted from students' education. The court rejected this analysis, noting that with the government's analysis, an interstate commerce connection could be conjured from almost anything. Lopez went free because the law itself was unconstitutional, according to the court.

Congress made no attempt to pass similar legislation after the case was decided. But in passing subsequent legislation, Congress was often careful to make a record as to why it believed it was addressing a problem that related to interstate commerce. In 1994, Congress passed the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA), having held hearings to establish why violence against women on a local level would impair interstate commerce. In 1994, while enrolled at Virginia Polytechnic Institute (Virginia Tech), Christy Brzonkala alleged that Antonio Morrison and James Crawford, both students and varsity football players at Virginia Tech, had raped her. In 1995, Brzonkala filed a complaint against Morrison and Crawford under Virginia Tech's sexual assault policy. After a hearing, Morrison was found guilty of sexual assault and sentenced to immediate suspension for two semesters. Crawford was not punished. A second hearing again found Morrison guilty. After an appeal through the university's administrative system, Morrison's punishment was set aside, as it was found to be "excessive." Ultimately, Brzonkala dropped out of the university. Brzonkala then sued Morrison, Crawford, and Virginia Tech in federal district court, alleging that Morrison's and Crawford's attack violated 42 USC Section 13981, part of the VAWA, which provides a federal civil remedy for the victims of gender-motivated violence. Morrison and Crawford moved to dismiss Brzonkala's suit on the ground that Section 13981's civil remedy was unconstitutional. In dismissing the complaint, the district court found that that Congress lacked authority to enact Section 13981 under either the commerce clause or the Fourteenth Amendment, which Congress had explicitly identified as the sources of federal authority for the VAWA. Ultimately, the court of appeals affirmed, as did the Supreme Court.

The Supreme Court held that Congress lacked the authority to enact a statute under the commerce clause or the Fourteenth Amendment because the statute did not regulate an activity that substantially affected interstate commerce nor did it redress harm caused by the state. Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist wrote for the court that "under our federal system that remedy must be provided by the Commonwealth of Virginia, and not by the United States." Dissenting, Justice Stephen G. Breyer argued that the majority opinion "illustrates the difficulty of finding a workable judicial Commerce Clause touchstone." Justice David H. Souter, dissenting, noted that VAWA contained a "mountain of data assembled by Congress...showing the effects of violence against women on interstate commerce."

The absence of a workable judicial commerce clause touchstone remains. In 1996, California voters passed the Compassionate Use Act, legalizing marijuana for medical use. California's law conflicted with the federal Controlled Substances Act (CSA), which banned possession of marijuana. After the Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA) seized doctor-prescribed marijuana from a patient's home, a group of medical marijuana users sued the DEA and US Attorney General John Ashcroft in federal district court.

The medical marijuana users argued that the CSA—which Congress passed using its constitutional power to regulate interstate commerce—exceeded Congress's commerce clause power. The district court ruled against the group, but the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals reversed and ruled the CSA unconstitutional because it applied to medical marijuana use solely within one state. In doing so, the Ninth Circuit relied on *U.S. v. Lopez* (1995) and *U.S. v. Morrison* (2000) to say that using medical marijuana did not "substantially affect" interstate commerce and therefore could not be regulated by Congress.

But by a 6–3 majority, the Supreme Court held that the commerce clause gave Congress authority to prohibit the local cultivation and use of marijuana, despite state law to the contrary. Justice John Paul Stevens argued that the court's precedents established Congress's commerce clause power to regulate purely local activities that are part of a "class of activities" with a substantial effect on interstate commerce. The majority argued that Congress could ban local marijuana use because it was part of such a class of activities: the national marijuana market. Local use affected supply and demand in the national marijuana market, making the regulation of intrastate use "essential" to regulating the drug's national market.

Notice how similar this reasoning is to the court's earlier reasoning in *Wickard v. Filburn* (Section 4.6.2). In contrast, the court's conservative wing was adamant that federal power had been exceeded. Justice Clarence Thomas's dissent in *Gonzalez v. Raich* stated that Raich's local cultivation and consumption of marijuana was not "Commerce...among the several States." Representing the "originalist" view that the Constitution should mostly mean what the Founders meant it to mean, he also said that in the early days of the republic, it would have been unthinkable that Congress could prohibit the local cultivation, possession, and consumption of marijuana.

Key Takeaway

The commerce clause is the basis on which the federal government regulates interstate economic activity. The phrase “interstate commerce” has been subject to differing interpretations by the Supreme Court over the past one hundred years. There are certain matters that are essentially local or intrastate, but the range of federal involvement in local matters is still considerable.

Exercises

1. Why would Congress have power under the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to require restaurants and hotels to not discriminate against interstate travelers on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, or national origin? Suppose the Holiday Restaurant near I-80 in Des Moines, Iowa, has a sign that says, “We reserve the right to refuse service to any Muslim or person of Middle Eastern descent.” Suppose also that the restaurant is very popular locally and that only 40 percent of its patrons are travelers on I-80. Are the owners of the Holiday Restaurant in violation of the Civil Rights Act of 1964? What would happen if the owners resisted enforcement by claiming that Title II of the act (relating to “public accommodations” such as hotels, motels, and restaurants) was unconstitutional?
2. If the Supreme Court were to go back to the days of *Hammer v. Dagenhart* and rule that only goods and services involving interstate movement could be subject to federal law, what kinds of federal programs might be lacking a sound basis in the commerce clause? “Obamacare”? Medicare? Homeland security? Social Security? What other powers are granted to Congress under the Constitution to legislate for the general good of society?

This page titled [4.2: The Commerce Clause](#) is shared under a [CC BY-NC-SA](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by [Anonymous](#).

- [4.2: The Commerce Clause](#) by Anonymous is licensed [CC BY-NC-SA 3.0](#). Original source: <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/waymakerintromarketingxmasterfall2016>.