No. 08-

In the Supreme Court of the United States

DAVID GREENWELL,

Petitioner,

v.

PAUL PARSLEY,

Respondent.

On Petition for a Writ of Certiorari to the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit

PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI

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QUESTION PRESENTED

Petitioner was a deputy sheriff of Bullitt County, Kentucky, a jurisdiction that does not have a policy barring public employees from seeking political office. When petitioner announced that he was running for the office of sheriff as a Republican, respondent, the incumbent Democrat, fired petitioner the very same day, concededly (and solely) because petitioner had decided to run against him. Affirming the summary dismissal of petitioner's subsequent suit, the Sixth Circuit held—in acknowledged conflict with four other circuits—that petitioner's termination does not even implicate the First Amendment because, purportedly, "the First Amendment * * * has not been extended to candidacy alone" and "the simple announcement of a candidacy" does not constitute "protected political speech."

The question presented is whether the First Amendment is implicated when a public employee is fired for announcing his candidacy for elected office.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS—continued

Page

TABLE OF CONTENTS—continued

Page

APPENDICES

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES

Page(s)

CASES

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES—continued

Page(s)

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES—continued

Page(s)

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES—continued

Page(s)

TABLE OF AUTHORITIES—continued

Page(s)

CONSTITUTION AND STATUTES

MISCELLANEOUS

PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI

Petitioner David Greenwell respectfully petitions for a writ of certiorari to review the judgment of the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit in this case.

OPINIONS BELOW

The Sixth Circuit's opinion (App., *infra*, 1a–9a) is reported at 541 F.3d 401. The Sixth Circuit's order denying rehearing (*id.* at 23a–24a) is unreported. The initial decision of the United States District Court for the Western District of Kentucky granting summary judgment to the respondent (*id.* at 17a–22a) is not included in any official reporter, but is available at 2007 WL 196896. The district court's subsequent opinion denying petitioner's motion to vacate the judgment (*id.* at 10a–16a) is similarly available at 2007 WL 1406955.

JURISDICTION

The Sixth Circuit issued its decision on September 2, 2008, and denied rehearing on January 26, 2009. This Court has jurisdiction pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1254(1).

CONSTITUTIONAL PROVISION INVOLVED

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution—which "applies to the States through the Fourteenth" Amendment (*Mills* v. *Alabama*, 384 U.S. 214, 218 (1966))—provides, in relevant part:

> Congress shall make no law * * * abridging the freedom of speech * * * or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

STATEMENT

This case presents an important and recurring question that this Court has never directly addressed and that has openly divided the lower courts: Is the First Amendment implicated when a public employee, permitted by state and municipal law to seek elected office, is fired for announcing his candidacy against his ultimate superior?

In the decision below, the Sixth Circuit reaffirmed yet again its long-standing view that the First Amendment affords *no* protection to a public employee fired under these circumstances because, purportedly, "the First Amendment * * * has not been extended to candidacy alone" and the "simple announcement of a candidacy" does not constitute "protected political speech." App., *infra*, 5a–6a.

The Sixth Circuit's opinion stands in palpable tension with numerous decisions of this Court, including those holding: (1) that there *is* a First Amendment interest in political candidacy (see, *e.g.*, *Lubin* v. *Panish*, 415 U.S. 709, 716 (1974)), and that speech relating to political campaigns is a core concern of the First Amendment (see, *e.g.*, *Monitor Patriot Co.* v. *Roy*, 401 U.S. 265, 271–272 (1971)); (2) that the First Amendment permits an adverse employment action against a public employee for speaking publicly on a matter of public concern if, but only if, the employer's interest in the efficient delivery of services outweighs the employee's interest in commenting on matters of public concern (see, *e.g.*, *Pickering* v. *Bd. of Educ.*, 391 U.S. 563, 568 (1968)); and (3) that the First Amendment allows the dismissal of a public employee for lack of political loyalty if, but only if, political loyalty is necessary for

the effective performance of the employee's job (see, *e.g.*, *Branti* v. *Finkel*, 445 U.S. 507, 518 (1980)).

The decision below—which reaffirms for the third time a rule adopted by the Sixth Circuit more than a decade ago—also directly conflicts with decisions of at least four other circuits, each of which has squarely held that the First Amendment *is* implicated, at least under certain circumstances, when a public employee announces his candidacy for public office. In addition to dividing the circuits, the question presented has confused them, leading to unpredictable and at times perverse results.

The Sixth Circuit's decision is both wrong and consequential. By completely denying any First Amendment protection to a public employee's announcement of his candidacy for elected office, the Sixth Circuit effectively grants public employers unchecked authority to fire any subordinate who decides to seek elected office. Thus, the decision below not only allows public employers to adopt (constitutionally permissible) viewpoint-neutral policies that bar public employees from engaging in partisan activity generally, but also allows public employers to engage in (constitutionally impermissible) viewpoint discrimination by—as was the case here—selectively punishing only those employees who campaign against a particular candidate or party.

In addition to negating the First Amendment rights of public employees who might wish to seek elected office, the Sixth Circuit's decision also harms voters. Particularly at the state and local level, the people who are most knowledgeable about governmental operations, be it the county clerk's office or the local water board, are often the very same public employees who hold positions subordinate to the

elected official currently heading the relevant governmental entity. Consequently, any rule—such as the one adopted by the Sixth Circuit—that exposes these employees to the threat of termination upon announcing their candidacy for office will inevitably reduce the universe of qualified candidates willing to seek office, and thus harm voters both by depriving them of the employees' insights during the campaign and by limiting their choice of candidates at the ballot box.

Because the Sixth Circuit's decision affects important federal rights in an oft-repeated context, because the decision below is in tension with decisions of this Court and in open conflict with decisions of several other circuits, because the lower court split has led to confusion and will not be resolved absent this Court's intervention, and because the rule adopted by the Sixth Circuit is plainly wrong, review by this Court is clearly warranted.

A. Factual Background

From 1999 to 2005, petitioner David Greenwell was a deputy sheriff of Bullitt County, Kentucky. In 2005, Greenwell decided to switch party affiliation and run for the office of Bullitt County sheriff as a Republican. An article discussing Greenwell's candidacy appeared on September 7, 2005, in the LOUISVILLE COURIER-JOURNAL. App., *infra*, 3a. The article reported that, if elected, Greenwell planned on creating a public relations position within the sheriff's department that would "follow up with people who file police reports to make sure the department handled their complaint[s] to their satisfaction," an innovation that Greenwell believed "would hold deputies accountable and improve the department's image." *Ibid.*

Respondent Paul Parsley, a Democrat, was the incumbent Bullitt County sheriff. Upon reading the LOUISVILLE COURIER-JOURNAL article and learning of Greenwell's candidacy, Parsley called Greenwell into his office. During the meeting that followed, Parsley showed Greenwell a copy of the article, in which Parsley had highlighted the portions reporting that Greenwell was running for sheriff and describing Greenwell's statements about the changes he would bring to the sheriff's office if elected.

Parsley fired Greenwell later that same day. Upon doing so, he providing Greenwell with a termination letter that stated:

> This will confirm that as of September 7, 2005 you informed the public and me personally that you are running against me for Sheriff in the 2006 election. Therefore, I am terminating your employment with me and my office for obvious reasons.

App., *infra*, 4a. Parsley subsequently testified that he had fired Greenwell because "'[h]e wanted to take my job away from me. . . . He put it in the paper he was running for sheriff—was gonna take my job.'" *Ibid.*[1]

It was not the first time that Greenwell had announced a run for office while serving as a Bullitt County deputy sheriff. In 2002, Greenwell, then a Democrat, unsuccessfully sought the position of Bullitt County jailer. No adverse employment action was taken against Greenwell at that time. This was con-

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[1] Ultimately, neither Greenwell nor Parsley was elected sheriff. Parsley lost the Democratic primary, and Greenwell lost the general election. App., *infra*, 4a.

sistent with the fact that neither Kentucky nor Bullitt County has prohibited at-will public employees from seeking political office. In fact, five Bullitt County sheriff's department employees other than Greenwell ran for offices other than sheriff during the 2006 election cycle. As Parsley concedes, "none suffered any adverse employment action, just like Greenwell in 2002." Appellee's Brief at 12, *Greenwell* v. *Parsley*, 541 F.3d 401 (6th Cir. 2008) (No. 07-5694), 2007 WL 4963214. Indeed, Parsley candidly admits that "[t]he difference in this case is that Greenwell chose to run for the position held by Sheriff Parsley." *Ibid.*

B. Proceedings Below

Greenwell filed suit under 42 U.S.C. § 1983 alleging, in relevant part, that he had been fired in retaliation for exercising his First Amendment rights.[2] Given Parsley's concession about his motivation for firing Greenwell, there was no dispute as to the relevant facts, and Parsley moved for summary judgment. Finding that Greenwell was fired because he "announc[ed] his intention to take his boss's office," an act that the court characterized as "personal insubordination" (App., *infra*, 21a), the district court granted Parsley's motion for summary judgment, concluding that because "Greenwell chose to express his political views by running for the political office

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[2] Initially, Greenwell brought claims against Parsley and another defendant under both 42 U.S.C. § 1983 and 42 U.S.C. § 1985. Subsequently, however, Greenwell voluntarily dismissed all claims against the second defendant, and the § 1985 claim against Parsley, who was sued both individually and in his official capacity as Sheriff of Bullitt County. App., *infra*, 18a n.1.

held by his boss" "*Carver* v. *Dennis*, 104 F.3d 847 (6th Cir. 1997), governs our case and requires dismissal." App., *infra*, 20a.

The district court denied Greenwell's subsequent motion to vacate the judgment, adhering to its earlier conclusion that Greenwell had been fired "solely for seeking his boss's position." App., *infra*, 14a. In continued reliance on *Carver*, the district court held that "[i]nsubordination in seeking his boss's position was not a constitutional right of the plaintiff, so the court need not apply the [*Pickering*] balancing test." *Ibid.*[3]

Noting that "there is nothing in the record to belie the conclusion that the termination was because of [Greenwell's] candidacy" (App., *infra*, 6a–7a), the Sixth Circuit affirmed. A panel of that court agreed that "this case cannot be meaningfully distinguished from *Carver*" and, in doing so, expressly reaffirmed the Circuit's prior holding that First Amendment protection does "not * * * extend[ ] to candidacy alone" and that "the simple announcement of a candidacy" does not constitute "protected political speech" because "[t]he announcement of candidacy 'is nothing more than the assertion of a rival candidacy.'" *Id.* at 5a–7a.

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[3] Having concluded that Greenwell's First Amendment rights were not implicated by his firing, the district court—in an apparent allusion to *Branti* and *Elrod* v. *Burns*, 427 U.S. 347 (1976)—also stated that it "need not examine whether a close working relationship existed that would afford the sheriff a wide degree of deference in his firing decisions." App., *infra*, 14a–15a. Cf. *Carver*, 104 F.3d at 850 (holding that plaintiff's "discharge implicates none of the concerns raised by *Elrod* or *Branti*").

Judge Martin concurred only in the judgment. He agreed that *Carver* was controlling circuit authority, but wrote "separately to point out once again the weak precedential support for" *Carver* and to "express [his] hope" that the Sixth Circuit would "revisit this critical First Amendment issue en banc." App., *infra*, 7a. Noting that "the holding in *Carver* was based on two decisions that do not support its final conclusion" and might have been animated by "hostility to the First Amendment," Judge Martin observed that the rule adopted in *Carver* and reaffirmed below "puts [the Sixth Circuit] in opposition with as many as six other circuits, which have held that firings based on one's political candidacy do violate the First Amendment." *Id.* at 7a–8a. Likening *Carver* to "a stray cat that hangs around the door and infests the house with fleas," Judge Martin bemoaned the fact that *Carver* "continues to plague [Sixth Circuit] jurisprudence." *Id.* at 8a–9a. But, notwithstanding Judge Martin's plea that it revisit the rule announced in *Carver* and reaffirmed by the panel, the Sixth Circuit denied Greenwell's petition for rehearing en banc. *Id.* at 23a–24a.

REASONS FOR GRANTING THE PETITION

I. THE SIXTH CIRCUIT'S DECISION—WHICH HOLDS THAT A PUBLIC EMPLOYEE'S CANDIDACY FOR POLITICAL OFFICE DOES NOT EVEN IMPLICATE THE FIRST AMENDMENT—IS IN TENSION WITH PRIOR DECISIONS OF THIS COURT AND DIRECTLY CONFLICTS WITH DECISIONS OF OTHER CIRCUITS.

The Sixth Circuit's rule, first announced in *Carver* and reaffirmed in this case, is inconsistent with this Court's constitutional jurisprudence and in

open conflict with decisions of at least four other circuits. As the Sixth Circuit has explained, *Carver*'s essential holding is that "there is no protected right to candidacy under the First Amendment." *Murphy* v. *Cockrell*, 505 F.3d 446, 450 (6th Cir. 2007). Thus, under *Carver* and the decision below, public employers are, as a matter of First Amendment law, free to fire (or otherwise discipline) public employees for seeking political office without any constitutional limitation whatsoever. That result, which—as illustrated by this case—permits viewpoint discrimination against a public employee for challenging a particular candidate or party, cannot be reconciled with this Court's precedent or the decisions of other circuits.

A. The Sixth Circuit's Holding Is In Tension With This Court's Repeated Recognition That Citizens, Including Public Employees, Have First Amendment Interests In Running For Elected Office, Speaking On Matters Of Public Concern, And Participating In The Political Process.

1. This Court has recognized that restrictions on political candidacy implicate the First Amendment.

This Court has stated frequently that the First Amendment "has its fullest and most urgent application precisely to the conduct of campaigns for political office." *Monitor Patriot Co.* v. *Roy*, 401 U.S. 265, 271–272 (1971). See also, *e.g.*, *Eu* v. *San Francisco County Democratic Cent. Comm.*, 489 U.S. 214, 223 (1989) (quoting *Roy*). That oft-repeated admonition reflects the "practically universal agreement that a major purpose of" the First Amendment is "to protect

the free discussion of governmental affairs," including "discussions of candidates, * * * the manner in which government is operated or should be operated, and all such matters relating to political processes." *Mills* v. *Alabama*, 384 U.S. 214, 218–219 (1966). Moreover, because "an election campaign is a means of disseminating ideas as well as attaining political office," it is clear that "[o]verbroad restrictions on ballot access jeopardize [a] form of political expression." *Ill. State Bd. of Elections* v. *Socialist Workers Party*, 440 U.S. 173, 186 (1979).

Accordingly, although this Court has never passed on the question directly, its decisions have repeatedly recognized that political candidacy *does* implicate critical First Amendment interests. Indeed, one of the very cases cited by the Sixth Circuit in reaching the opposite conclusion, *Clements* v. *Fashing*, 457 U.S. 957 (1982), expressly acknowledges individuals' "First Amendment interests in candidacy." *Id.* at 971; see also *id.* at 977 n.2 (Brennan, J., dissenting) ("we have clearly recognized that restrictions on candidacy impinge on First Amendment rights of candidates and voters").[4]

Consistent with its recognition that individuals possess a First Amendment interest in candidacy, this Court has time and again declared unconstitu-

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[4] *Clements* upheld the particular ballot restrictions at issue on the ground that they imposed only "*de minimis* interference with appellees' interests in candidacy." 457 U.S. at 971–972 (plurality opinion). The Sixth Circuit misread *Clements*, erroneously taking this Court's statement that candidacy has not been recognized as a "fundamental right" for purposes of equal protection analysis (*id.* at 963) to mean that there is no First Amendment right to candidacy at all (cf. *Carver*, 104 F.3d at 851).

tional laws that unduly restrict candidates' access to the ballot. See, *e.g.*, *Socialist Workers Party*, 440 U.S. at 184 (invalidating ballot restriction because, *inter alia*, it impaired freedom to associate); *Lubin* v. *Panish*, 415 U.S. 709, 716 (1974) (striking down, on First Amendment and equal protection grounds, excessive filing fee that burdened "an individual candidate's * * * important interest in the continued availability of political opportunity"); *Bullock* v. *Carter*, 405 U.S. 134, 143 (1972) (upholding constitutional challenge brought by prospective candidates against statute that "create[d] barriers to candidate access to the primary ballot"); *Williams* v. *Rhodes*, 393 U.S. 23, 30 (1968) (invalidating ballot restriction because it burdened, *inter alia*, the freedom of association that "is protected by the First Amendment"); see also, *e.g.*, *McDaniel* v. *Paty*, 435 U.S. 618, 644 (1978) (White, J. concurring) ("Our cases have recognized the importance of the right of an individual to seek elective office and accordingly have afforded careful scrutiny to state regulations burdening that right."). Although they were ultimately decided largely on equal protection grounds, "[t]he First Amendment * * * lies at the root of these cases." *Williams*, 393 U.S. at 38 (Douglas, J., concurring).[5]

Moreover, this Court's "ballot access cases based on First Amendment grounds have rarely distinguished between the rights of candidates and the rights of voters." *Cook* v. *Gralike*, 531 U.S. 510, 531

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[5] Equal protection analysis requires that the Court identify and weigh the individual interest that the plaintiff alleges is being discriminatorily denied. Thus, when deciding equal protection cases involving ballot access, the Court's recognition of a right to candidacy is not mere dictum, but rather a necessary element of the decision.

(2001) (Rehnquist, C.J., concurring). On the contrary, this Court recognizes that "the rights of voters and the rights of candidates do not lend themselves to neat separation" (*Bullock*, 405 U.S. at 143) because "voters can assert their preferences only through candidates" (*Anderson* v. *Celebrezze*, 460 U.S. 780, 787 (1983)). Thus, any infringement of a candidate's right to candidacy is simultaneously an impairment of the voters' right to vote.

The Sixth Circuit ignored this substantial body of precedent when it erroneously concluded that the First Amendment's protections do "not * * * extend[] to candidacy." App., *infra*, 5a.

2. This Court has recognized that the First Amendment protects the rights of public employees to speak on matters of public concern—especially matters relating to electoral politics.

For more than a half-century, this Court has "unequivocally rejected" the view that public employees "may constitutionally be compelled to relinquish the First Amendment rights they would otherwise enjoy as citizens to comment on matters of public interest." *Pickering* v. *Bd. of Educ.*, 391 U.S. 563, 568 (1968) (citing *Keyishian* v. *Bd. of Regents*, 385 U.S. 589 (1967); *Shelton* v. *Tucker*, 364 U.S. 479 (1960); *Wieman* v. *Updegraff*, 344 U.S. 183 (1952)). Recognizing instead that "speech on public issues occupies the 'highest rung of the hierarchy of First Amendment values,' and is entitled to special protection" (*Connick* v. *Myers*, 461 U.S. 138, 145 (1983) (quoting *NAACP* v. *Claiborne Hardware Co.*, 458 U.S. 886, 913 (1982); *Carey* v. *Brown*, 447 U.S. 455, 467 (1980)), the Court has repeatedly held that "the First Amendment protects," albeit with certain limita-

tions, "a public employee's right * * * to speak as a citizen addressing matters of public concern." *Garcetti* v. *Ceballos*, 547 U.S. 410, 417 (2006).

Accordingly, when a public employee challenges an adverse employment action taken against the employee because of his or her speech, the court hearing that challenge must ask two questions. The first question, the threshold question,

> requires determining whether the employee spoke as a citizen on a matter of public concern. If the answer is no, the employee has no First Amendment cause of action based on his or her employer's reaction to the speech. If the answer is yes, then the possibility of a First Amendment claim arises. The question becomes whether the relevant government entity had an adequate justification for treating the employee differently from any other member of the general public.

Garcetti, 547 U.S. at 418 (citations omitted).

But in the decision below, as in *Carver*, the Sixth Circuit either failed to apply this analytic framework at all, or failed to apply it correctly. According to the court of appeals, petitioner's declaration that he intended to run for the office of sheriff was not entitled to any First Amendment protection because, purportedly, "the simple announcement of a candidacy" does not constitute "protected political speech." App., *infra*, 5a–6a. The precise basis for the Sixth Circuit's holding is unclear. Perhaps the court believes that an announcement of candidacy for elected office does not address a matter of public concern; alternatively, the Sixth Circuit might believe that such an announcement is unprotected even though it addresses

a matter of public concern. Either way, the decision below is plainly at odds with prior decisions of this Court.

Any suggestion that an announcement of candidacy for elected office does not address a matter of public concern is frivolous. This Court has "recognized repeatedly that 'debate on the qualifications of candidates [is] integral to the operation of the system of government established by our Constitution'" (*Eu*, 489 U.S. at 223 (quoting *Buckley* v. *Valeo*, 424 U.S. 1, 14 (1976) (per curiam)), and thus "is 'at the core of our electoral process and of the First Amendment freedoms,' not at the edges." *Republican Party of Minn.* v. *White*, 536 U.S. 765, 781 (2002) (quoting *Eu*, 489 U.S. at 222–223). Because the electorate must know who the candidates for office are before their qualifications can be debated, the candidates' announcements of their respective candidacies are a prerequisite for informed discussion among voters. As such, candidacy announcements are indeed matters of public concern, which include, *inter alia*, all "matters as to which 'free and open debate is vital to informed decisionmaking by the electorate.'" *Rankin* v. *McPherson*, 483 U.S. 378, 395 (1987) (Scalia, J., dissenting) (quoting *Pickering*, 391 U.S. at 571–572).

To the extent the Sixth Circuit's holding rests on the proposition that a public employee's candidacy announcement is entirely outside the zone of First Amendment protection although it addresses a matter of public concern, the decision below is clearly contrary to *Pickering* and its progeny. This Court's precedents simply do not leave room for a determination that a public employee's speech, although addressed to matters of public concern, can be punished without triggering any First Amendment scrutiny at

all. On the contrary, when evaluating a public employee's First Amendment claim, courts must "seek 'a balance between the interests of the [employee], as a citizen, in commenting upon matters of public concern and the interest of the State, as an employer, in promoting the efficiency of the public services it performs through its employees.'" *Connick*, 461 U.S. at 142 (quoting *Pickering*, 391 U.S. at 568). Of course, the employer's interest may ultimately be found to outweigh the employee's interest in a particular case, but such a determination can be made only *after* recognition and due consideration of the employee's constitutional interest in commenting on matters of public concern.[6]

According to the Sixth Circuit, "*Pickering* * * * do[es] not apply" (*Carver*, 104 F.3d at 852) when a public employee announces that he is running for the office currently held by his ultimate superior because

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[6] Moreover, when weighing the employee's interest in speaking on matters of public concern, courts must be mindful that "the First Amendment interests at stake extend beyond the individual speaker" given "the importance of promoting the public's interest in receiving the well-informed views of government employees engaging in civic discussion." *Garcetti*, 547 U.S. at 419. See also *San Diego* v. *Roe*, 543 U.S. 77, 82 (2004) (per curiam) ("Were [public employees] not able to speak on [the operation of their employers], the community would be deprived of informed opinions on important public issues."); *Waters* v. *Churchill*, 511 U.S. 661, 674 (1994) ("Government employees are often in the best position to know what ails the agencies for which they work."); *Pickering*, 391 U.S. at 571–572 (because "free and open debate is vital to informed decision-making by the electorate" and because public employees "are, as a class, the members of a community most likely to have informed and definite opinions" regarding governmental operations, "it is essential that they be able to speak freely on such questions without fear of retaliatory dismissal").

"'[t]he First Amendment does not require that an official in [an employer's] situation nourish a viper in the nest.'" App., *infra*, 5a (quoting *Carver*, 104 F.3d at 853). But contrary to the rule announced in *Carver* and reaffirmed below, the mere fact that petitioner's announcement of his candidacy was directed against—and thus implicitly critical of—his ultimate superior does not categorically deprive petitioner's announcement of all First Amendment protection. As this Court stated in *Pickering*, "statements by public officials on matters of public concern must be accorded First Amendment protection despite the fact that the statements are directed at their nominal superiors." 391 U.S. at 574 (citing *Garrison* v. *Louisiana*, 379 U.S. 64 (1964); *Wood* v. *Georgia*, 370 U.S. 375 (1962)). Thus, as made clear by *Pickering* itself, the *Pickering* balancing test *does* apply to petitioner's announcement of his candidacy for sheriff.

3. This Court has recognized that restrictions on political participation by public employees must, at minimum, either be viewpoint neutral or advance a governmental rather than partisan interest.

Petitioner acknowledges that the First Amendment rights of public employees are subject to certain limitations that do not apply to other citizens. But, as this Court has made clear in its decisions concerning the Hatch Act and patronage dismissals, restrictions on public employees' political participation must be either viewpoint-neutral or necessary for the achievement of a governmental rather than partisan interest.

When considering the Hatch Act and its state-law equivalents, this Court has upheld legislative enactments that prohibit identifiable categories of

public employees from engaging in certain defined political activities. See, *e.g.*, *Broadrick* v. *Oklahoma*, 413 U.S. 601 (1973); *United States Civil Serv. Comm'n* v. *Nat'l Ass'n of Letter Carriers*, 413 U.S. 548 (1973); *United Pub. Workers* v. *Mitchell*, 330 U.S. 75 (1947). In so doing, however, the Court has taken pains to emphasize that the restrictions it has approved "are not aimed at particular parties, groups, or points of view, but apply equally to all partisan activities of the type described." *Letter Carriers*, 413 U.S. at 564. See also *Broadrick*, 413 U.S. at 616 (noting that statute at issue "is not * * * directed at particular groups or viewpoints"); *James* v. *Tex. Collin County*, 535 F.3d 365, 378 n.12 (5th Cir. 2008) ("Central to [the Court's First Amendment] holding was that the Hatch Act's prohibitions were neutral and nondiscriminatory."). That result, of course, accords with "[t]he principle of viewpoint neutrality that underlies the First Amendment itself." *Bose Corp.* v. *Consumers Union of United States, Inc.*, 466 U.S. 485, 505 (1984).

When considering the constitutionality of patronage (*i.e.*, the practice of allocating public jobs based on political loyalty), this Court has recognized that it "clearly infringes First Amendment interests" (*Elrod* v. *Burns*, 427 U.S. 347, 360 (1976)) by "severely restrict[ing] political belief and association" (*id.* at 372). Nonetheless, this Court has held patronage dismissals to be constitutional, but only where "they advance[] a governmental, rather than a partisan, interest." *Branti* v. *Finkel*, 445 U.S. 507, 517 n.12 (1980). Thus, patronage dismissals are permissible if, but only if, "the hiring authority can demonstrate that party affiliation is an appropriate requirement for the effective performance of the public office involved." *Id.* at 518.

The decision below disregards this Court's teachings in its Hatch Act and patronage opinions.

First, unlike the generally applicable, viewpoint-neutral statutes upheld in *Letter Carriers*, *Broadrick*, and *Mitchell*, the *ad hoc* restriction on political activity approved by the Sixth Circuit in this case (and in *Carver*) *was* "aimed at [a] particular part[y] * * * or point[] of view" and did *not* "apply equally to all partisan activities of the type" involved. *Letter Carriers*, 413 U.S. at 564. Petitioner was fired not because he ran for office generally, nor even because he ran for the office of sheriff in particular, but rather because he ran for the office of sheriff *against the current incumbent*. Indeed, respondent admits that other sheriff's department employees ran for offices other than sheriff, that "none suffered any adverse employment action," and that "[t]he difference in [petitioner's] case is that [petitioner] chose to run for the position held by Sheriff Parsley." Appellee's Brief at 12, *Greenwell* v. *Parsley*, 541 F.3d 401 (6th Cir. 2008) (No. 07-5694), 2007 WL 4963214. Although "it would obviously not be permissible for the government to prohibit employees only from running against incumbents" (*James*, 535 F.3d at 378 n.12), that is precisely what the Sixth Circuit's rule allows.

Second, contrary to this Court's admonition that patronage dismissals are constitutionally permissible only if "the hiring authority can demonstrate that party affiliation is an appropriate requirement for the effective performance of the public office involved" (*Branti*, 445 U.S. at 518), the Sixth Circuit required no such showing on respondent's part. Indeed, the Sixth Circuit did not even consider whether petitioner—who at the time of his termination was one of thirty-seven Bullitt County deputy sheriffs

(see App., *infra,* 14a)—held a post whose effective performance required political loyalty to respondent.[7] In fact, far from "advanc[ing] a governmental, rather than a partisan, interest" (*Branti*, 445 U.S. at 517 n.12), respondent's dismissal of petitioner seems to have been motivated by nothing more than respondent's pique at petitioner's "'rival candidacy.'" App., *infra*, 6a–7a.[8] Nonetheless, in the Sixth Circuit's

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[7] Cf. *Heggen* v. *Lee*, 284 F.3d 675 (6th Cir. 2002) (holding that Kentucky deputy sheriffs are entitled to First Amendment protection from patronage firings).

[8] If a restriction placed on a public employee's political participation is not viewpoint-neutral, then the fact that it "advance[s] a governmental, rather than a partisan, interest" is merely a necessary but insufficient condition for finding that restriction constitutional; it must first be shown that "party affiliation is an appropriate requirement for the effective performance of the public office involved." *Branti*, 445 U.S. at 517–518 & n.12. If that threshold showing is not made, then the restriction cannot survive scrutiny under *Branti*. Moreover, because political candidacy is inherently both a speech act ("vote for me and the policies I espouse") and an associational act ("join with me in my campaign to get me elected"), a candidacy restriction that is not viewpoint-neutral is unconstitutional unless it also satisfies the *Pickering* test, which applies when a public employee is prevented from (or disciplined for) speaking on a matter of public concern. See *O'Hare Truck Service, Inc.* v. *City of Northlake*, 518 U.S. 712, 719 (1996) (recognizing that "the balancing *Pickering* mandates will be inevitable" in cases "where specific instances of the employee's speech or expression, which require balancing in the *Pickering* context, are intermixed with a political affiliation requirement"). Because the *Pickering* test requires that the State's interest in efficient delivery of public services *outweigh* the employee's interest in discussing matters of public concern for the speech restriction to be constitutional (see *Pickering*, 391 U.S. at 568), a restriction that survives scrutiny under *Branti* may nonetheless fail the *Pickering* test.

view, petitioner's "discharge implicates none of the concerns raised by *Elrod* or *Branti*." *Carver*, 104 F.3d at 850. That holding cannot be reconciled with this Court's teachings.

B. The Courts Of Appeals Are Divided And Confused By The Question Presented.

The question whether a public employee's candidacy for elected office is protected by the First Amendment has divided and confused the courts of appeals. As Judge Martin noted in his concurring opinion below (see App., *infra*, 7a–8a & n.1), the Sixth Circuit's holding that the First Amendment does not protect a public employee's candidacy announcement conflicts with decisions of several other circuits. In addition to dividing the circuits, the question presented by this petition has also confused them, leading to results that are unpredictable and at times perverse. This Court's guidance is urgently needed to resolve the conflict and confusion among the circuits.

The decision below is contrary to decisions of the Fifth, Seventh, Ninth, and Tenth Circuits, each of which has squarely recognized that the First Amendment *is* implicated, at least in certain circumstances, when a public employee is fired or otherwise disciplined for simply declaring his or her candidacy for elected office.[9] In *Click* v. *Copeland*, 970 F.2d 106

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[9] The Sixth Circuit has acknowledged the split on at least three occasions. See App., *infra*, 5a–7a; *Murphy*, 505 F.3d at 450 n.1 (noting that "[o]ther Circuits have not followed Carver"); *Myers* v. *Dean*, 216 F. App'x 552, 555 (6th Cir. 2007) (acknowledging "other circuits' holdings," but pronouncing itself "bound by *Carver*"). See also *Deemer* v. *Durrell*, 110 F. Supp. 2d 1177, 1181 (S.D. Iowa 1999) (noting split). In his concurring

(5th Cir. 1992), for example, the Fifth Circuit considered whether the First Amendment rights of two deputy sheriffs were violated when the incumbent sheriff, who was running for reelection, "transferred them to less desirable positions in retaliation for announcing their candidacy for the sheriff's office." *Id.* at 108. Finding that their "conduct, running for elected office, addressed matters of public concern," the Fifth Circuit readily concluded—in a holding directly contrary to the Sixth Circuit's holding below—that the deputies' candidacies were "protected by the First Amendment" and that it was therefore necessary "to engage in * * * *Pickering-Connick* balancing." *Id.* at 111–112. Similarly, in *Jantzen* v. *Hawkins*, 188 F.3d 1247 (10th Cir. 1999), the Tenth Circuit—considering the case of a deputy sheriff who was fired immediately after announcing his candidacy against the incumbent sheriff—squarely held that the deputy's "candidacy for office" constituted "political speech" that "undoubtedly relates to matters of public concern" and therefore "satisfies the first prong of the *Pickering/Connick* test." *Id.* at 1257. See also *Finkelstein* v. *Bergna*, 924 F.2d 1449, 1453 (9th Cir. 1991) (holding, in a case involving an assistant prosecutor punished for running against his ultimate supervisor's preferred candidate, that "[d]isciplinary action discouraging a candidate's bid

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opinion below, Judge Martin observes that *Carver* puts the Sixth Circuit "in opposition with as many as six other circuits." App., *infra*, 7a–8a. Judge Martin cites decisions of the First, Fourth, Seventh, Eighth, Ninth, and Eleventh Circuits (but none from the Fifth or Tenth Circuits). See *id.* at 8a n.1. As discussed below (see *infra*, 22 n.10), the cases from the First, Fourth, Eighth and Eleventh Circuits cited by Judge Martin recognized, albeit in other contexts, individuals' constitutionally protected interest in running for public office.

for elective office 'represent[ed] punishment by the state based on the content of a communicative act' protected by the first amendment") (quoting *Newcomb* v. *Brennan*, 558 F.2d 825, 828–829 (7th Cir. 1977)).[10]

In *Newcomb*—which involved a deputy city attorney who "was dismissed when, against the wishes of the city attorney, he announced his intention to run for Congress" (558 F.2d at 827)—the Seventh Circuit held, like the Sixth Circuit below, that "plaintiff's interest in seeking office, by itself, is not entitled to constitutional protection" (*id.* at 828). But, in direct conflict with the Sixth Circuit's holding in this

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[10] Several other circuits, and at least one state court of last resort, have recognized, in other contexts, that citizens have a constitutionally protected interest in seeking public office. See *Flinn* v. *Gordon*, 775 F.2d 1551, 1554 (11th Cir. 1985) (stating in dicta that plaintiff "certainly had a constitutional right to run for office"); *Washington* v. *Finlay*, 664 F.2d 913, 927–928 (4th Cir. 1981) (acknowledging "[t]he first amendment's protection of the freedom of association and of the rights to run for office, have one's name on the ballot, and present one's views to the electorate"); *Magill* v. *Lynch*, 560 F.2d 22, 29 (1st Cir. 1977) ("Candidacy is a First Amendment freedom."); *Bolin* v. *State Dep't of Pub. Safety*, 313 N.W.2d 381, 382 (Minn. 1981) (recognizing, in decision invalidating resign-to-run rule, that "[w]hile the right to run for public office has not been characterized as fundamental, it is an important right protected by the first amendment"). See also *Stiles* v. *Blunt*, 912 F.2d 260, 265 (8th Cir. 1990) (acknowledging "the right to run for public office" while noting that it is not a "fundamental" right for purposes of equal protection analysis); *United States* v. *Tonry*, 605 F.2d 144, 150 (5th Cir. 1979) ("There is no question that candidacy for office and participating in political activities are forms of expression protected by the first amendment."), abrogated on other grounds by *Steel Co.* v. *Citizens for a Better Env't*, 523 U.S. 83, 93 (1998).

case, the Seventh Circuit nonetheless concluded that the "plaintiff's interest in seeking office was protected by the First Amendment" because the employer who dismissed him was not acting pursuant to a "facially neutral program" but instead "wished to discourage [plaintiff's] candidacy in particular." *Id.* at 828–829.

Although the Fifth, Seventh, Ninth, and Tenth Circuits have, in contrast to the Sixth, held that First Amendment interests are, at least potentially, implicated when a public employee is fired simply for declaring his or her candidacy for elected office, confusion among the courts as to the source and scope of the First Amendment's protection has led to unpredictable and sometimes bizarre results.[11] In *Jantzen*, for example, the Tenth Circuit held that although the candidate's right to *free speech* was implicated by his dismissal, his right to *free association* was not, because "[t]he right to political affiliation does not encompass the mere right to affiliate with oneself" and thus, purportedly, does not protect the candidate's right to participate in his own campaign. 188 F.3d at 1252 (holding that "candidacy *qua* candidacy" does not implicate associational rights) (citing, *inter alia*, *Carver*, 104 F.3d at 850). Consequently, the

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[11] The rule adopted in *Carver* has also led to unpredictable results within the Sixth Circuit. Compare *Murphy*, 505 F.3d at 450 (holding *Carver* inapplicable and reversing grant of summary judgment to defendant employer because the firing was based on the employee's speech "during the course of her campaign" rather than her candidacy announcement at the outset of her campaign), with *Myers*, 216 F. App'x at 555 (affirming, on basis of *Carver*, summary dismissal of suit brought by employee who was dismissed immediately after election by victorious rival candidate).

Tenth Circuit held, it was only the candidate's fellow public employees—who had been disciplined for supporting his candidacy—and not the candidate himself who had an associational claim. *Ibid.*[12] Similarly odd is the result in *Bart* v. *Telford*, 677 F.2d 622 (7th Cir. 1982). In that case, the Seventh Circuit held that a public employee's First Amendment speech rights were not implicated when she was forced to leave her job upon her announcement of her *own* candidacy (because the employer's action was purportedly viewpoint-neutral), but that her speech rights were implicated when, after ending her run for office, she endorsed *someone else's* candidacy. See *id.* at 624–625.

Because the conflict and confusion surrounding a public employee's First Amendment right to announce his or her candidacy for elected office is both deep and persistent, this Court's intervention is warranted.

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[12] The Fifth Circuit, by contrast, has recognized that an employee's candidacy against his or her boss does "involve[]" the employee's "political affiliation" precisely because that candidacy makes the employee the "boss's political rival." *Jordan* v. *Ector County*, 516 F.3d 290, 297 (5th Cir. 2008); see also *id.* at 296 (recognizing that the "*Elrod-Branti* doctrine applies when an employment decision is based upon support of and loyalty to a particular candidate as distinguished from a political party") (internal quotation marks omitted); cf. *Carver*, 104 F.3d at 850 (employee's discharge for rival candidacy "implicates none of the concerns raised by *Elrod* or *Branti*").

II. THE SIXTH CIRCUIT'S RULE DENYING ALL FIRST AMENDMENT PROTECTION TO PUBLIC EMPLOYEES FIRED FOR SEEKING ELECTED OFFICE THREATENS SIGNIFICANT AND PERNICIOUS CONSEQUENCES.

The issue presented in this petition has national significance. While thirty-five States have enacted "little" Hatch Acts, which limit the political activities of public employees (on a viewpoint-neutral basis),[13] fifteen other States and countless municipalities have not—presumably because they have concluded that their communities benefit when public employees *are* permitted to run for elected office. Certain States, including Kentucky, limit the political activities only of career civil service employees, and thus exempt at-will employees like petitioner from those restrictions. See App., *infra*, 22a; Ky. Rev. Stat. § 18A.140 (restricting political activities of "classified service" employees").[14] Accordingly, in every such jurisdiction, many (or all) public employees may run for elected office unimpeded by any statutory prohibition. What they face instead, in the absence of guidance from this Court, is the specter that they will nonetheless be fired or otherwise disciplined because their boss does not approve of their campaign in particular. This situation inevitably chills the po-

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[13] See Rafael Gely & Timothy D. Chandler, *Restricting Public Employees' Political Activities: Good Government or Partisan Politics?*, 37 HOUS. L. REV. 775, 794 (2000).

[14] Conversely, only career civil servants are statutorily protected against patronage dismissals in Kentucky. See App., *infra*, 22a; Ky. Rev. Stat. § 18A.095(1) ("A classified employee with status shall not be dismissed, demoted, suspended, or otherwise penalized except for cause.")

litical speech and political activity of public employees (see *Pickering*, 391 U.S. at 574 ("it is apparent that the threat of dismissal from public employment is * * * a potent means of inhibiting speech")), and—as illustrated by the facts of this case—allows the imposition of *ad hoc* restrictions "aimed at particular parties, groups, or points of view" (*Letter Carriers*, 413 U.S. at 564).[15]

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[15] The mere fact that a public employer may bar public employees' political participation altogether, through a viewpoint-neutral statute such as the Hatch Act, does not mean that the employer is therefore free to selectively bar an employee's candidacy because of disagreement with that candidacy in particular. As exemplified by this Court's designated-public-forum doctrine, the greater power (to prohibit a class of activity altogether) does not always encompass the lesser power (to prohibit particular instances of such activity). Cf. *Widmar* v. *Vincent*, 454 U.S. 263, 273 (1981) ("The Constitution forbids a State to enforce certain exclusions from a forum generally open to the public, even if it was not required to create the forum in the first place."). Indeed, First Amendment law is rife with such holdings, which have been applied to public employees repeatedly. For example, although a State has no obligation to establish any particular cause of action, if the State does establish a certain cause of action, the Petition Clause then prevents the State from punishing a public employee who brings suit under that cause of action (at least when the suit implicates a matter of public concern). See, *e.g.*, *Rendish* v. *City of Tacoma*, 123 F.3d 1216, 1221–1222 (9th Cir. 1997) (collecting cases). Similarly, the First Amendment does not compel a legislative body to entertain public commentary during its sessions (see *Minn. State Bd. for Cmty. Colleges* v. *Knight*, 465 U.S. 271, 283–284 (1984)), but it does forbid legislatures from closing public comment sessions to government employees or their representatives once such sessions have been established (see *e.g.*, *Local 2106, Int'l Ass'n of Firefighters* v. *City of Rock Hill*, 660 F.2d 97, 100–101 (4th Cir. 1981)). Similarly here, because at-will government employees are free under Kentucky law to run for office, the First Amendment is plainly implicated when such employees

This situation likely wreaks the greatest harm at the state and local levels. In many communities, especially smaller communities, most of the people with relevant experience concerning the operations of the local government—the schools, municipal utilities, and law enforcement agencies—will be the very same public employees who, subordinate to an incumbent elected official, are currently employed by those entities. A rule like the one adopted by the Sixth Circuit, which permits that official to unilaterally shrink the pool of likely candidates by firing (or threatening to fire) any employee who decides to run for office against his wishes, can thus have a dramatic, adverse impact on the number and quality of candidates for local elective office. The employees deterred from running are not the only ones to suffer as a result. Because "[g]overnment employees are often in the best position to know what ails the agencies for which they work" (*Waters* v. *Churchill*, 511 U.S. 661, 674 (1994)), and are therefore "the members of a community most likely to have informed and definite opinions" about governmental operations (*Pickering*, 391 U.S. at 572), the general electorate suffers a significant loss by being "deprived of informed opinions on important public issues" (*San Diego* v. *Roe*, 543 U.S. 77, 82 (2004)).[16]

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are selectively punished for deciding to embrace that opportunity.

[16] The facts of this case illustrate the danger. As is presumably typical of candidacy announcements, petitioner's candidacy announcement was not simply a declaration that he intended to seek office, but also informed voters of a policy innovation that he believed would be beneficial to the community and that he intended to implement if elected. See App., *infra*, 3a; cf. *Socialist Workers Party*, 440 U.S. at 186 ("an election campaign is a

As reported cases and everyday experience make clear, the risk that a public employee will be deterred (or outright prevented) from seeking elected office by an incumbent official displeased with that employee's candidacy is not limited to situations in which the employee seeks to challenge his or her ultimate superior. In *Newcomb*, for example, the plaintiff, a deputy city attorney, was "dismissed when, against the wishes of the city attorney, he announced his intention to run for Congress." 558 F.2d at 827. See also Shawn Day, *Portsmouth Lawyer's Run for Office Cited as a Reason to Fire Him*, VIRGINIAN-PILOT, Mar. 17, 2009 (reporting the termination of an assistant district attorney who announced a decision to run for district attorney in another community and was allegedly fired because the two district attorneys are friends).

Given its pernicious effect on political speech, electoral choices, and self-governance by an informed electorate, this Court should review the decision below, which enables a public employer to punish employees on an *ad hoc* and potentially discriminatory basis for engaging in conduct that lies at the very core of First Amendment protections.

III. THIS CASE IS AN APPROPRIATE VEHICLE FOR RESOLVING THE DEEP AND PERSISTENT SPLIT AMONG THE LOWER COURTS.

Although the Court has never directly addressed the precise question presented, the Sixth Circuit's rule is, for the reasons suggested above, plainly wrong. Furthermore, right or wrong, the Sixth Cir-

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means of disseminating ideas as well as attaining political office").

cuit's rule, announced in *Carver* and reaffirmed below, is in clear conflict with decisions of four other circuits. This case is an appropriate vehicle for resolving that conflict, which has persisted for more than a decade and directly affects important federal rights.

Review in this case is appropriate because the facts of this case are simple and undisputed. Respondent admits, and the district court expressly found, that petitioner was fired solely because he announced his candidacy against respondent. See App., *infra*, 13a; see also *id.* at 4a. Similarly, there is no dispute that employees of the Bullitt County sheriff's department are in general allowed to seek elected office. Indeed, respondent admits that five employees other than petitioner were allowed to run for offices other than sheriff during the same election cycle. See Appellee's Brief at 12, *Greenwell* v. *Parsley*, 541 F.3d 401 (6th Cir. 2008) (No. 07-5694), 2007 WL 4963214. Employment disputes are seldom so neatly drawn.

The clarity of the factual record in this case makes the Sixth Circuit's refusal to revisit the *Carver* rule *en banc* all the more remarkable—especially in light of Judge Martin's express plea that the court do precisely that. See App., *infra*, 7a. It has been nearly a dozen years since *Carver* was decided. In that time, three separate panels of the Sixth Circuit have recognized the conflict between *Carver* and the decisions of other circuits. See App., *infra*, 5a–7a; *Murphy*, 505 F.3d at 450 n.1 (noting that "[o]ther Circuits have not followed Carver"); *Myers*, 216 F. App'x at 555 (acknowledging "the strength of [plaintiff's] argument and other circuits' holdings," but pronouncing itself "bound by *Carver*"). And yet each

time, despite this open and acknowledged conflict, the Sixth Circuit has denied requests that it revisit the rule *en banc*. See App., *infra*, 23a–24a (order denying rehearing *en banc*); *Murphy*, 505 F.3d at 446 (rehearing denied); *Myers* v. *Dean*, No. 06-3683 (6th Cir. Aug. 2, 2007) (order denying petition for rehearing *en banc*). The message is clear: The Sixth Circuit will not revisit *Carver* and resolve this persistent circuit split. Only this Court can do so, and it should do so in this case.

CONCLUSION

The petition for a writ of certiorari should be granted.

Respectfully submitted.

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APRIL 2009

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