Much scholarship has been devoted to demonstrating that John Marshall in *Marbury* (1803), was an astute politician who pulled one over on Jeffersonian Republicans. Marshall engaged in the “delightful” activity of “calculated audacity,” namely, establishing the power of the Supreme Court by denying it had jurisdiction in the case. Also dominant is that Marshall “invented” judicial review in *Marbury* and thus established the judiciary as the sole interpreter of the Constitution. Accordingly, the dominant majority of scholars conclude that Marshall would invite future justices to reject the Framers as their guide to constitutional interpretation, and adopt, instead, the doctrine of a “living Constitution.” In short, Marshall invented the idea that we live under a Constitution, but the Constitution is what the Court says it is. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that *Marbury* is the constitutional text and Marshall is the judicial framer in constitutional law texts.

There has been an influential minority of scholars, however, who portray this Marshallian foundation of creative living constitutional jurisprudence as mythological nonsense: If we let Marshall speak for himself, the minority say, then we will discover a Marshallian originalism grounded in the principles of the Constitution and the teachings of the Framers. *Marbury* is an attempt to establish Constitutional supremacy rather than judicial supremacy. According to this understanding, the Marshallian role for the judiciary is to 1) protect the rights of individuals against the abuse of governmental power and 2) control legislative, executive, and, yes, judicial excess. Rather than establishing the Court as the sole and supreme expositor of the Constitution, Marshall establishes the judiciary as the protector of the fundamental rule of individual law and institutional balance and responsibility.

Historians disagree as to what Marshall did and when and how he did it. We know that after the election of 1800, lame-duck President John Adams, with Senate approval, named several justices of the peace—known to us as “the midnight judges”—and that then Secretary of State, John Marshall, failed to deliver William Marbury’s commission before the new administration took office in March 1801. When the Jeffersonians came to power in Congress in 1801, they made several changes in the Judiciary Act, and President Jefferson and Secretary of State Madison did not deliver Marbury’s commission. Also clear, is that the defeated Federalists wanted to embarrass Jefferson on constitutional grounds and enlisted Chief Justice Marshall in their effort. But these arguments, at best, suggest that Marshall did what he had to do in order to secure the Federalist Party cause. Which, of course, he actually failed to do! So that does not make him a very astute politician in the larger party-oriented sense. But that still leaves open the claim that Marshall was interested in the judiciary, and he pulled a fast one in order to establish judicial review. By the way, Marbury never did receive his commission. This partisan ideological interpretation, in effect, solves the complications of *Marbury* by denying that anything principled was at stake.
Was *Marbury*, then, about the establishment of “judicial review”? After all, the phrase judicial review does not appear in Article III of the Constitution and we all know that is what the Supreme Court does. The problem with this repeatedly advanced and unsubstantiated claim is this: the phrase “judicial review” does not appear in *Marbury*. But on a substantive level, the right of the Court to review acts of the legislature was agreed to at the Constitutional Convention and understood to extend to judicial cases only.

The President alone was given the power to exercise a conditional veto over bills before they became laws since it was understood that judges were already given the authority to subsequently review an act of Congress and determine whether or not it was constitutional.

During ratification, the Antifederalist Brutus argued that the “equity” language of Article III not only established judicial review; it was an invitation to the judiciary to establish judicial supremacy. Alexander Hamilton responded in *Federalist No. 78*. He explicitly defended judicial review and denied it would lead to judicial supremacy: the Constitution required the judiciary to declare unconstitutional an act of the legislature that violated “the manifest tenor” of the Constitution and, moreover, the judges would never substitute their will for their judgment. Marshall himself, in the Virginia Ratifying Convention, stated that if the federal legislature passed a law “not warranted by any of the powers enumerated,” it would be considered by the judges to be an infringement of the Constitution, which they are to guard. Even Jefferson, in his private correspondence with Madison, accepted judicial review of the legislature if exercised with judicial restraint.

If partisan politics and judicial review are not the driving forces undergirding *Marbury* what then is going on? We have two choices: either *Marbury* is about establishing judicial supremacy or it is about establishing the rule of law. In the analysis, we need to consider whether Marshall’s decision proves Brutus or Hamilton correct.

Marshall relies exclusively, in the first part of his opinion, on the specific language of the Constitution. He states that Marbury was properly nominated and confirmed in accordance with Article II, Section 2 of the Constitution. Thus, Marbury was constitutionally “an officer of the United States.” According to Article II, Section 3, continues Marshall, the President “shall Commission all the officers of the United States.” Thus, says Marshall, the Secretary of State, shall deliver the commission. Even though the commission was not delivered by the then Secretary of State—namely Marshall—neither the newly elected President, nor the newly appointed Secretary of State, had “the executive discretion” to withhold the commission. In this matter, concluded the Chief Justice, Jefferson and Madison had merely a “magisterial,” and not a “political” status.

In the second part of his opinion, Marshall also appeals to the specific language of the Constitution. Although a mandamus indeed should be issued to order the delivery of Marbury’s commission, the

The phrase “judicial review” does not appear in *Marbury*. But on a substantive level, the right of the Court to review acts of the legislature was agreed to at the Constitutional Convention and understood to extend to judicial cases only.
Supreme Court is constitutionally unable to issue that order. Article III, Section 2 of the Constitution, says “the Supreme Court shall have original jurisdiction in all cases affecting [1] ambassadors, [2] other public ministers and consuls, and [3] those in which a state shall be a party. In all other cases, the Supreme Court shall have appellate jurisdiction.” [Emphasis added.] To Marshall, the language of the Constitution imposes a maximum of three instances where the Supreme Court can exercise original jurisdiction. Since the authority to issue a mandamus is not specifically enumerated, the Supreme Court does not have the constitutional ability to issue one. That part of the Judiciary Act of 1789, which authorizes the Supreme Court “to issue writs of mandamus in cases warranted by principles and usages of law, to any courts appointed, or persons holding office, under the authority of the United States,” is unconstitutional.

Marshall’s message is clear: We live under a “written constitution,” and the language of that document places a written limitation not only on Congress, but also on the Executive and the Judiciary. Congress must conform to the language of the Constitution when passing laws, the Executive must conform when executing the law, and so too must the Judiciary. “The fundamental and paramount law of the nation,” limits the power of all three branches of the federal government to the language of the written constitution. In support, Marshall says his understanding of written constitutionalism conforms “to the solicitude of the convention,” and “all those who have formed written constitutions.”

Is the language of Article III as prohibitive as Marshall says it is and does it unambiguously support his interpretation? Article III bestows on Congress the authority to develop the structure of the courts and to install judicial procedures. Thus it was left to Congress to fill in the details. The First Congress did just that. It passed the Judiciary Act, one section of which dealt with the power of the Court to issue a writ of mandamus in certain specific situations. So the question becomes: What is the status of the First Congress in the creation of the originalist position?

Marshall observed in *Cohens v. Virginia* (1821) that the First Congress contained many members who had served in the Constitutional Convention, and we should take the First Congress seriously because they express the intent of the Constitutional Convention and the ratifying conventions. In *Marbury*, however, Marshall did not seek any assistance from the First Congress, the Constitutional Convention, *The Federalist* or ratifying conventions.

It is instructive that Madison, who as Representative Madison supported the mandamus provision in the 1789 Act, and who later failed to issue the commission in 1801, didn’t think that the Constitution he helped create, ratify, explain, and defend was being violated. Nor would *Marbury* even pass Hamilton’s *Federalist No. 78* “manifest tenor” test for judicial rejection of an Act of Congress: neither the First Congress nor the Jeffersonian Executive violated the “manifest tenor” of the Constitution when the Congress bestowed original jurisdiction to issue a mandamus and when the Executive refused to issue a commission to Marbury. The language of the Constitution does not make it manifestly clear that a newly elected President, and a newly appointed Secretary of State, should be compelled to deliver a judicial commission signed by a previous President and undelivered by a former Secretary of State. Doesn’t Article III state unambiguously that judicial appointments are matters to be dealt with by the Senate and the President? And it is troublesome that Marshall claims that it is the province of the judiciary, and not the Congress or the President, to make the distinction between what is judicial and what is political.
Toward the end of *Marbury*, Marshall announces, rather unexpectedly, “It is emphatically the province and duty of the judicial department to say what the law is.” This bold remark comes after the mandamus matter has been decided and the case put to rest. In the early part of the decision, Marshall called the Constitution, the “paramount law of the nation,” [emphasis added] which constrained every branch of government including the judiciary. Again, near the end, he says it is the duty of the judiciary “to say what the law is.” Marshall can’t possibly mean that the written constitution, the paramount law, is what the judiciary says it is. Or if he is not saying this, isn’t reasonable for future justices to claim this is what he is saying? Marshall concludes: “If two laws conflict with each other, the courts must decide on the operation of each,” because “this is of the very essence of judicial duty.”

Does Marshall introduce the idea of the rule of law in the first part of the decision, but conclude that the Supreme Court is the ultimate arbiter of the Constitution? In short, we may live under the language of the Constitution but the Court interprets the language of the Constitution. After all, to interpret the language of the Constitution, for Marshall, but not for Madison, is “emphatically the province and duty of the judicial department.” It is “too extravagant to be maintained,” he fumed, “that the intention of those who gave” the judicial power was that “the constitution should not be looked into.” How does he portray the “intention” of the Framers? What does looking into mean, and who does the looking?

Even one citation from the Founding debates would help, but Marshall offers none. Marshall says the Framers would support 1) the Supreme Court looking into the Constitution and 2) his decision in *Marbury*. We must take his word for it! But he also claims “the framers of the constitution contemplated that instrument [the Constitution], as a rule for the government of the courts, as well as of the legislature.” In short, according to the “influential minority” of scholars, no exclusive power to interpret the fundamental law is claimed for the Court in *Marbury*.

But when the First Congress looked into the Constitution, which it did when considering the Bill of Rights (and by the way this was a Congress overwhelming occupied by the Framers and ratifiers) the Congress saw nothing wrong in passing the mandamus provision of the Judiciary Act. Moreover, Marshall’s mentor, President George Washington, signed the bill into law. So we are left with the question: is the “dominant majority” or the “influential minority” correct concerning Marshall’s decision in *Marbury*?

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Case Background

The presidential election of 1800 was bitter and divisive. Thomas Jefferson, a Republican, defeated incumbent John Adams, a Federalist. The Federalist-controlled Congress passed a law, just days before Jefferson was to take office, allowing outgoing President John Adams to appoint forty-two new justices of the peace. These new justices became known as “midnight judges” because of the last-minute nature of their appointments.

By the time Jefferson took office, not all of the commissions formalizing the appointments had been delivered. President Jefferson ordered his Secretary of State, James Madison, not to deliver the commissions to Adams’s appointees. One of those commissions not delivered was for William Marbury. Marbury asked the Supreme Court to issue a “writ of mandamus” – a court order forcing Jefferson and Madison to deliver the commissions. The Judiciary Act, passed by Congress in 1789, had given the Supreme Court the power to issue these writs.

Sitting as Supreme Court Chief Justice was John Marshall, a Federalist, and the cousin of Thomas Jefferson. In his landmark opinion, Marshall asserted that Marbury had a right to his commission, but that the Supreme Court lacked the power under Article III of the Constitution to force the President to deliver it. In so ruling, the Supreme Court overturned the portion of the 1789 Judiciary Act granting the Supreme Court the power to issue writs of mandamus. The Supreme Court had found an act of Congress unconstitutional, and judicial review was first exercised.
DOCUMENT A

Brutus, No. 15, 1788

[The] supreme court under this constitution would be exalted above all other power in the government, and subject to no controul. ...I question whether the world ever saw, in any period of it, a court of justice invested with such immense powers, and yet placed in a situation so little responsible....

Judges under this constitution will controul the legislature, for the supreme court are authorised in the last resort, to determine what is the extent of the powers of the Congress; they are to give the constitution an explanation, and there is no power above them to set aside their judgment. The framers of this constitution appear to have followed that of the British, in rendering the judges independent, by granting them their offices during good behaviour, without following the constitution of England, in instituting a tribunal in which their errors may be corrected; and without adverting to this, that the judicial under this system have a power which is above the legislative, and which indeed transcends any power before given to a judicial by any free government under heaven....

If, therefore, the legislature pass any laws, inconsistent with the sense the judges put upon the constitution, they will declare it void; and therefore in this respect their power is superior to that of the legislature.

- What is Brutus's argument against ratification of the Constitution and the proposed court system?

DOCUMENT B

Federalist No. 78, 1788 [emphasis Hamilton’s]

Whoever attentively considers the different departments of power must perceive, that, in a government in which they are separated from each other, the judiciary, from the nature of its functions, will always be the least dangerous to the political rights of the Constitution; because it will be least in a capacity to annoy or injure them. The Executive not only dispenses the honors, but holds the sword of the community. The legislature not only commands the purse, but prescribes the rules by which the duties and rights of every citizen are to be regulated. The judiciary, on the contrary, has no influence over either the sword or the purse; no direction either of the strength or of the wealth of the society; and can take no active resolution whatever. It may truly be said to have neither FORCE nor WILL, but merely judgment; and must ultimately depend upon the aid of the executive arm even for the efficacy of its judgments.

- Why does Hamilton call the judiciary the “least dangerous” branch of government?
**DOCUMENT C**

Federalist No. 78, 1788

There is no position which depends on clearer principles, than that every act of a delegated authority, contrary to the tenor of the commission under which it is exercised, is void. No legislative act, therefore, contrary to the Constitution, can be valid.

- Restate Hamilton’s assertion in your own words.

**DOCUMENT D**

Federalist No. 78, 1788

[T]he courts were designed to be an intermediate body between the people and the legislature, in order, among other things, to keep the latter within the limits assigned to their authority. The interpretation of the laws is the proper and peculiar province of the courts. A constitution is, in fact, and must be regarded by the judges, as a fundamental law. It therefore belongs to them to ascertain its meaning, as well as the meaning of any particular act proceeding from the legislative body.

- Who or what does Hamilton assert has the authority to judge the constitutionality of federal laws?

**DOCUMENT E**

Federalist No. 81, 1788

[T]here is not a syllable in the plan under consideration which DIRECTLY empowers the national courts to construe the laws according to the spirit of the Constitution, or which gives them any greater latitude in this respect than may be claimed by the courts of every State. I admit, however, that the Constitution ought to be the standard of construction for the laws, and that wherever there is an evident opposition, the laws ought to give place to the Constitution.

- What power does Hamilton deny the Constitution directly gives the national courts?
- What does Hamilton say should be the “standard of construction” for laws?
Sections of Article III of the United States Constitution, 1789

Section 1. The judicial power of the United States, shall be vested in one Supreme Court, and in such inferior courts as the Congress may from time to time ordain and establish....

Section 2. The judicial power shall extend to all cases, in law and equity, arising under this Constitution, the laws of the United States, and treaties made, or which shall be made, under their authority... both as to law and fact, with such exceptions, and under such regulations as the Congress shall make.

- What is the Supreme Court’s power?

The Supremacy Clause of the United States Constitution, 1789

This Constitution, and the laws of the United States which shall be made in pursuance thereof; and all treaties made, or which shall be made, under the authority of the United States, shall be the supreme law of the land; and the judges in every state shall be bound thereby, anything in the Constitution or laws of any State to the contrary notwithstanding.

- Does this section of the Constitution support Hamilton’s argument in Document B?

Section 13, Judiciary Act of 1789

The Supreme Court ... shall have power to issue ... writs of mandamus, in cases warranted by the principle and usages of law, to any courts appointed, or persons holding office, under the authority of the United States....

- What powers does Section 13 give the Supreme Court?
The Kentucky Resolution, Thomas Jefferson, 1798

That the several states who formed that instrument [the Constitution], being sovereign and independent, have the unquestionable right to judge of its infraction; and that a nullification, by those sovereignties, of all unauthorized acts done under colour of that instrument, is the rightful remedy.

- Who or what does Thomas Jefferson assert has the authority to judge the constitutionality of federal laws?

Unanimous Majority Opinion, Marbury v. Madison, 1803

The authority ... given to the Supreme Court, by the act establishing the judicial courts of the United States, to issue writs of mandamus to public officers, appears not to be warranted by the Constitution....

Certainly all those who have framed written constitutions contemplate them as forming the fundamental and paramount law of the nation, and consequently the theory of every such government must be, that an act of the legislature, repugnant to the Constitution, is void....

It is emphatically the province and duty of the judicial department to say what the law is. Those who apply the rule to particular cases, must of necessity expound and interpret that rule. If two laws conflict with each other the courts must decide on the operation of each....

So if a law be in opposition to the constitution; if both the law and the constitution apply to a particular case, so that the court must either decide that case conformably to the law, disregarding the constitution; or conformably to the constitution, disregarding the law; the court must determine which of these conflicting rules governs the case. This is of the very essence of judicial duty....

The judicial power of the United States is extended to all cases arising under the constitution. Could it be the intention of those who gave this power, to say that, in using it, the constitution should not be looked into? That a case arising under the constitution should be decided without examining the instrument under which it arises? This is too extravagant to be maintained.

- Why does this ruling argue that the Supreme Court has the power to interpret the Constitution?
- What does Marshall call the “very essence of judicial duty”?
Thomas Jefferson to Spencer Roane, 1819

For intending to establish three departments, coordinate and independent, that they might check and balance one another, [the Constitution] has given, according to this opinion [Marbury v. Madison], to one of them alone the right to prescribe rules for the government of the others, and to that one, too, which is unelected by and independent of the nation. ...The Constitution on this hypothesis is a mere thing of wax in the hands of the judiciary, which they may twist and shape into any form they please.

How does Jefferson’s reaction to the decision in Marbury v. Madison compare to Hamilton’s description of the judicial branch in Document A?

KEY QUESTION

Argue whether or not the Supreme Court should have the power to overturn unconstitutional federal laws.
The Marbury decision was unanimous. Do split decisions (for example, 5-4 votes) indicate that a decision might be overturned in the future?