Accepting Reality: The Time for Adopting Discretionary Review in the Courts of Appeals Has Arrived

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Accepting Reality: The Time for Adopting Discretionary Review in the Courts of Appeals Has Arrived

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Nobody disputes the enormous volume crisis currently facing the federal courts of appeals. Much disagreement exists, however, as to what to do about it. Many proposals have been offered that would tinker with the structure of the current system. We could add more judges. We could increase the size of judicial staffs. We could redraw boundary lines, creating fewer larger circuits or more

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smaller circuits. However, none of these changes, even if implemented, would affect reality; the volume crisis is not curable by tinkering with the structure of the courts or the number of people considering appeals. Just as we cannot build enough prisons to house all our criminals, we cannot build enough courts to hear all our cases. There are only two ways to deal with the volume crisis:

One is to decrease the total number of cases that are filed in the district courts, thus decreasing the total universe of federal cases and hence the number of judgments from which appeals can be taken. The other is simply not to permit appeals from all of the final judgments and other decisions of district courts and administrative agencies that are now appealable.¹

The trend toward more filings in the district courts is not likely to change, especially in light of the continuing federalization of state-law crimes and the creation of more civil causes of action by Congress. This leaves only one alternative: we must no longer permit appeals for every dispute. The time has come to accept reality and adopt discretionary review in the courts of appeals.

Through the use of various summary procedures, the courts of appeals themselves have recognized the need for different approaches to different types of cases. Meritless appeals are discarded as quickly and with as little effort as possible. Under a truly discretionary system, the courts of appeals could avoid the facade of full deliberation and its corresponding inefficiency and assure that those appeals deserving of full deliberative treatment will receive it.

Part I of this Essay will explore the volume crisis, the reasons for it, and projections for the future. Part II will explain how the current summary procedures are inadequate and examine the pros and cons of adopting a truly discretionary procedure. Part III will then analyze how the courts could implement such a plan without hindering the right to an appeal.

I. THE VOLUME CRISIS

There is a statistic for everything, and there are many examples of dubious "crises" based on one statistical study or another. However, the volume crisis is neither invented nor exaggerated. Rather, it is real and completely identifiable by legitimate research.

The federal circuit courts received 2830 appeals in 1950.² In 1970, there were 11,662 appeals, up more than 400%.³ By 1990, the number of appeals filed had increased to 41,000, and by 1994, that number was approaching 49,000—up more than 1700% from 1950.⁴ Between 1989 and

3. Id.
4. Id.
1993 alone, the number of federal appeals rose by more than 25%.

Statistics within the Fifth Circuit are similar. In 1960, there were 577 appeals filed in the Fifth Circuit. By 1993, that figure was up to 6411, an increase of over 1100%.

To place these figures in perspective, consider the impact on the individual judge. In 1960, the Fifth Circuit consisted of seven judges—meaning 82 cases per judge. In 1991, there were 13 judges on the court and 6165 appeals—meaning 474 cases per judge. These figures do not include the nonstop motions and petitions for rehearings, or the numerous administrative matters that require judicial attention.

The reasons for this skyrocketing of appellate filings are twofold: (1) the federalization of state crimes, and (2) the congressional enactment of a multitude of civil causes of action. Neither trend is likely to change. In United States v. Lopez, the Supreme Court inspired some hope in those frustrated by these trends by striking down the Gun Free School Zones Act as an unconstitutional use of congressional power under the Commerce Clause. But subsequent cases have come to see Lopez as an extreme example, an aberration, rather than the end of the trend toward federalizing state crimes. Similarly, congressionally created civil causes...
of action continue to increase. Moreover, even if these trends miraculously ceased tomorrow, the continued growth of the population and economy still would expand the amount of litigation. Exacerbating these trends, the proclivity to appeal district court losses is also on the rise.

If these trends continue, the courts will experience 90,114 appeals in the year 2000. The courts will face 198,147 appellate filings in 2010 and 428,203 in 2020. The more appeals there are, the less attention and deliberation a judge may give to each individual case. Not only is the crisis present today, it's going to become catastrophic tomorrow. "There is no point clinging to the past if the future arrived years ago."

II. ANALYZING DISCRETIONARY REVIEW

A. SUMMARY PROCEDURES—THE CURRENT APPROACH

Preparation for the future must begin now. After a multitude of studies, committees, and task forces, our court system has implemented nothing that will equip it to address adequately the exponentially growing workload. Most of the current proposals center around either (1) adding judges or staff, or (2) redrawing circuit lines. Neither approach will suffice. Simply adding judges will create only chaos:

[A]s Judge Posner puts it, "beyond a certain point there are too many judges to deliberate effectively." In particular, as the number of judges increases, the difficulty of maintaining uniformity of decisions becomes almost insuperable. The members of the court must struggle even to keep up with other judges’ opinions, let alone to identify and eliminate conflicts in language or result.

Nor will adding more law clerks help:

With three law clerks, you're about at your limit as to what a single judge can absorb. Judges are like funnels: there's a big opening at the top and all the law clerks and the staff attorneys pour stuff in there. There's just a little funnel at the bottom. It all has to go through that one person. And unless the judge widens out that bottom so that it all just drops through rubber-stamped, you're not really getting any more done.

15. Parker, supra note 6, at 265.
16. Id.
18. Id.
19. See Arnold, supra note 2, at 538, 542.
20. King, supra note 8, at 959.
22. Arnold, supra note 2, at 543.
Similarly, altering the boundary lines for the various circuits, by either creating fewer larger circuits or more smaller circuits, will not be effective. Rather, these proposals would create even more problems. On the one hand, mega-circuits “disturb the clarity and stability of the law, which in turn increases litigiousness and complicates the disposition of cases.”

On the other hand, a system of many small circuits “dilutes the federalizing function of the courts of appeals.” Most significantly, redrawing the circuits will affect neither the number of appeals filed nor the number of appeals to be heard.

Thus, mere tinkering with size or structure will not suffice. “[A] radical approach is necessary. Time is of the essence. . . . [I]t is time to start thinking ‘big.’ Incremental [steps] will not solve our problem.” The time has arrived for the federal courts of appeals to adopt a system of discretionary review.

Current circuit court procedures implemented in response to the volume crisis underscore the need to allow the courts discretion in approaching different types of cases. More and more, courts are using “summary calendar” and “conference calendar” treatment of cases rather than issuing decisions after oral argument and full deliberation. Similarly, an increasing number of appeals are decided with one word—“Affirmed”—or with extremely terse language—“We agree with the decision of the district court.”

However, these methods are an inadequate means of combating the volume crisis. These procedures have caused judges to become in large part case processors, not jurists, as their full attention is given to only a few cases each year. Judge King notes that under such circumstances, “a two-track system can slip in to [sic] the modus operandi of even a conscientious but overloaded judge without the judge even being aware of it.” That is precisely what has happened. Many judges are so overwhelmed that they must use their discretion and devote their full attention to only a few cases. The remaining cases are given “summary treatment.” Many are affirmed in one word, in a few paragraphs, or on the basis of an opinion written by staff counsel or a law clerk with no direction whatsoever from the judge. As Judge Reinhardt of the Ninth Circuit has said, “Those who believe we are doing the same quality work

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26. Parker, supra note 6, at 265.
27. See Reinhardt, supra note 25, at 52.
28. See King, supra note 8, at 957-58.
29. Id. at 958; see Dragich, supra note 5, at 30-32.
30. King, supra note 8, at 963.
that we did in the past are simply fooling themselves.” Judge Lay agrees, stating that “courts of appeals today may provide in many appeals only an appearance of justice rather than justice itself.” In short, a large part of what now occurs in the federal courts of appeals is “routine, administrative decision making instead of the individualized deliberative processes normally associated with judicial decisions.” In a discretionary system, judges would not have to spend as much time and energy on the undeserving cases, thereby allowing more deliberation on those cases that warrant it.

B. THE PROS AND CONS OF DISCRETIONARY PROCEDURE

“The question is not whether justice (however you define that rather slippery term) shall be rationed, but how and to what extent it shall be rationed.” The courts already ration justice, and not all appeals deserve the same level of attention. Other than simply limiting the number of cases filed at the district court level, only discretionary review would have a tangible impact on the volume crisis. Discretionary review would assure full review of those cases that deserve it, and the quality of the entire appellate process would be improved: “[T]he discretionary approach would save time, money, and effort. Those cases that courts do designate for review would receive better treatment, including traditional collegial and deliberative appellate procedure, because judges would be processing fewer other appeals.”

The main potential drawback to a discretionary system is that “the discretionary procedure would additionally compromise the ability of circuits to correct errors and could ration their scarce resources into specific classes of cases which are deemed more worthy of consideration than others.” As Judge King has explained, “Every nation must be evaluated, in part, by the way in which it deals with its most vulnerable citizens. . . . [W]hen there is simply not enough judicial time to go around, the temptation is to give shorter shrift to the cases brought by our most vulnerable citizens.” This danger is real, and it should not be dismissed. Because of the potential for misuse of this discretion, the system should monitor the courts of appeals carefully. However, this hazard fails to outweigh the merits of adopting discretionary review.

31. Reinhardt, supra note 25, at 53; see Arnold, supra note 2, at 538 (“The volume problem is causing us to have too little time to think about some of the hard cases as much as we need to.”).
34. Nelson, supra note 5, at 114.
35. Parker, supra note 6, at 265; Arnold, supra note 2, at 536-37.
37. Id. at 1403 (footnote omitted).
38. King, supra note 8, at 963.
First, to the extent that our “most vulnerable citizens” might be given “shorter shrift” by our judicial system, there is no indication that a procedure of discretionary review would be any worse than the present system. Currently, with so much pressure on judges to get cases out while papers continue to accumulate, there is a real danger that judges will select the “nonsexy” cases for quick resolution. Similarly, a discretionary system would create a danger that the courts would ignore the low-profile or “typical” cases.

While the “it couldn’t get any worse” argument is not very comforting or appealing, it is indicative of just how bad the current deliberative environment is and how much a change is needed. As stated previously, the danger of unequal treatment is real and requires attention. However, it is not a problem that would be new under a discretionary system.

Second, the benefits of a discretionary system outweigh its potential drawbacks. Maintaining the facade of full deliberation under the current system is time-consuming and expensive. A discretionary system would allow a more honest description of what actually occurs. Furthermore, a discretionary system would improve the quality of the entire appellate process because it would ensure that the deserving cases do receive full deliberative treatment.

Last, a discretionary system would emphasize the importance of having the most qualified jurists possible at the trial court level, as these courts would often have the last word in resolving disputes. Highlighting the importance of having the best district judges possible would benefit the entire legal system.

III. DISCRETIONARY REVIEW AND THE RIGHT TO AN APPEAL

There is no constitutional right to an appeal.39 The so-called “right to an appeal” derives from 28 U.S.C. § 1291, which states that the courts of appeals have jurisdiction to hear appeals from final decisions of the district courts.40 The explicit wording of this statute does not mandate that the courts of appeals actually exercise that jurisdiction. Nevertheless, it is generally accepted that § 1291 confers a right to an appeal.41

40. 28 U.S.C. § 1291 (1994) (“The courts of appeals . . . shall have jurisdiction of appeals from all final decisions of the district courts.”); see Harlon L. Dalton, Taking the Right to Appeal (More or Less) Seriously, 95 Yale L.J. 62, 62 & n.4 (1985) (“It has long been clear that the right to appeal is statutory, and is not constitutionally compelled.”). Rule 3 of the Federal Rules of Appellate Procedure is entitled “Appeal as of Right—How Taken,” Fed. R. App. P. 3. However, the actual wording of Rule 3 refers to “[a]n appeal permitted by law as of right.” Id. Thus, Rule 3 does not create any right to an appeal independent of what is otherwise permitted by existing law.
A system of discretionary review would satisfy that right: 

[A]ll that an appeal as of right connotes is that the litigant who lost in the trial court has a right to put his case before an appellate tribunal, and to have that tribunal consider his contentions that the judgment should not stand. It does not necessarily carry with it a commitment to particular procedures.\textsuperscript{42}

A system of discretionary review would fulfill this appellate role. Even if the court denies review, it still will have considered, to some extent, the litigant’s contentions that the judgment should not stand.

In \textit{National Labor Relations Board v. Local No. 42, International Ass’n of Heat & Frost Insulators & Asbestos Workers},\textsuperscript{43} the Third Circuit upheld a denial of oral argument against a due process challenge because any one member of the panel could have required oral argument and the vote as to whether to have oral argument came only after the panel had received the briefs in each case.\textsuperscript{44} Similarly, a court of appeals could adopt a system of discretionary review where the briefs (or a petition for review) were received prior to any decision and one member of a panel could require review. Although the right to an appeal is revered,\textsuperscript{45} a discretionary system would not infringe on either due process or the statute.
tory right of an appeal.\textsuperscript{46}

In analyzing other procedures created by the courts of appeals, the Supreme Court has said that "[t]he requirements imposed by that guaranty [due process] are not technical, nor is any particular form of procedure necessary."\textsuperscript{47} Similarly, the guarantees of the statutory right of appeal should not be viewed as technical or requiring a particular form of procedure. The procedure due process requires "varies from case to case in accordance with differing circumstances . . . ."\textsuperscript{48}

Some courts have indicated that the statutory right to an appeal is not absolute. In \textit{Free v. United States},\textsuperscript{49} Judge Posner wrote that "[a]busers of the judicial process are not entitled to sue . . . , period."\textsuperscript{50} This limitation on access to the courts, however, is not limited to abusers of the system. "At a time of staggering federal caseloads, the need to devise alternative remedies for classes of litigation that do not imperatively require the full Article III treatment is urgent."\textsuperscript{51} Additionally, "[e]ven though we espouse the notion that all litigants deserve equal access to the courts, we have long accepted restricted access and the provision of different treatment for different kinds of disputes."\textsuperscript{52}

Fifth Circuit Local Rule 47.6, which provides for affirmance without an opinion, is but one example of how courts may change the procedures of the appellate process without affecting the statutory right to an appeal.\textsuperscript{53} Local Rule 47.6 is merely an example of "different treatment for different kinds of disputes."

Thus, even though there is an acknowledged statutory right to an appeal, a system of discretionary review would satisfy that right. The remaining question is who has the power to implement such a system. Clearly, Congress, which created the courts of appeals, could enact legislation implementing a system of discretionary review for those courts. Additionally, the Supreme Court could provide for discretionary review for the courts of appeals. The Supreme Court has rulemaking power over

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\item \textsuperscript{46} \textit{Bus see} 15A \textsc{Charles A. Wright et al., Federal Practice & Procedure} § 3901, at 24 (2d ed. 1992) ("[I]t should be clear that a court of appeals cannot properly refuse decision of a case within its jurisdiction simply because it seems too trivial to consort with the court's dignity or pressing workload.").
\item \textsuperscript{47} \textit{Inland Empire Dist. Council v. Millis}, 325 U.S. 697, 710 (1945).
\item \textsuperscript{48} \textit{FCC v. WJR, The Goodwill Station, Inc.,} 337 U.S. 265, 276 (1949).
\item \textsuperscript{49} 879 F.2d 1535 (7th Cir. 1989).
\item \textsuperscript{50} \textit{Id.} at 1536.
\item \textsuperscript{51} \textit{Id.; see also} Lucien v. Johnson, 61 F.3d 573, 575 (7th Cir. 1995) (Posner, J.); Savage v. CIA, 826 F.2d 561, 563 (7th Cir. 1987) (Posner, J.); Tinker-Bey v. Meyers, 800 F.2d 710 (7th Cir. 1986) (Posner, J.).
\item \textsuperscript{52} Judith Resnik, \textit{Precluding Appeals}, 70 \textsc{Cornell L. Rev.} 603, 611 (1985); see Parker, \textit{supra} note 6, at 268 ("Arguably . . . the appeal as of right has already been significantly undermined by the prevalent use of summary disposition and affirmance without opinion by the courts of appeals.").
\end{itemize}
practice and procedure.\textsuperscript{54} The rules adopted by the Supreme Court may not "abridge, enlarge or modify any substantive right."\textsuperscript{55} But because discretionary review would not infringe on the right to an appeal, the Supreme Court could establish the procedure by rule.

Furthermore, the courts of appeals themselves "may regulate their practice in any manner not inconsistent with" the Federal Rules of Appellate Procedure.\textsuperscript{56} Again, because discretionary review satisfies the statutory right to an appeal, such a system would not be inconsistent with the Federal Rules. Additionally, the courts of appeals may have unilateral, "inherent powers" to implement such a plan.\textsuperscript{57}

In short, the future cannot be put off any longer. The volume crisis is crippling our appellate system, and projections for the future are even worse. The courts must do something now. Discretionary review would save time, money, and effort and would more honestly describe the system currently in place, a system in which courts exercise discretion behind a facade of deliberation. Most importantly, a discretionary system would benefit the entire appellate process, as it would enable judges to give full deliberation to those cases that deserve it, instead of spending time and energy on cases that do not. The future is here. We had better accept it.

\textsuperscript{55} Id. § 2072(b).
\textsuperscript{56} FED. R. APP. P. 47.
\textsuperscript{57} See Parker & Hagin, supra note 23, at 236; see also Abney v. United, States, 431 U.S. 651, 662 n.8 ("It is well within the supervisory powers of the courts of appeals to establish summary procedures and calendars to weed out frivolous claims.").