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Designing Interstate Institutions: The Example of the Streamlined Sales & Use Tax Agreement

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INTRODUCTION

One of the strengths of the U.S. Constitution is that it draws up a fairly open floor plan for arranging the internal architecture of government. Justice Anthony Kennedy, for example, has likened the invention of federalism to a sort of Manhattan Project of political philosophy. With largely autonomous sub-national governments, we get tremendous opportunities for experiments in the goals and design of government. But, of course, the jostling of so many different political bodies also leads to serious collective action problems, as the Articles of Confederation experience taught us.

Fortunately, then, the Constitution also seems to offer many different avenues for coordinating national and local policies. The menu includes prescriptive federal legislation, judicially enforced

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constitutional rights, and compacts among states. Then there are offers of federal or other grants in exchange for state agreements, among many other solutions. Each of these, in turn, can involve many different permutations. An agreement might be held together by the threat of private suits, by the judgments of a new quasi-governmental entity established under the agreement, by a third party government arbiter, by public and stakeholder pressure in response to data

5 Of course, there are many senses in which we can describe constitutional rights as a way of shaping national policy. For instance, there is the communitarian sense in which the Constitution helps to define the limits of our political community and the meaning that attaches to membership in it. See, e.g., Frank Michelman, Law's Republic, 97 YALE L.J. 1493, 1503-15 (1988); Hiroshi Motomura, Federalism, International Human Rights, and Immigration Exceptionalism, 70 U. COLO. L. REV. 1361, 1392-94 (1999) (describing constitutional treatment of immigration as part of definition of national identity). Then, perhaps one metaphysical step down, there is the sense in which constitutional rights are expressions of national ideals of justice, which states are not free to contradict. See, e.g., JESSE CHOPER, JUDICIAL REVIEW AND THE NATIONAL POLITICAL PROCESS 185 (1980); Matthew D. Adler & Seth F. Kreimer, The New Etiquette of Federalism: New York, Printz, and Yeskey, 1998 SUP. CT. REV. 71, 127-30 (1998). And then there is the more pedestrian (but still important) sense in which constitutional rights serve an almost mechanical role in implementing good policy, as by preventing inefficient state interference with commerce, or remedying other kinds of collective action problems. See Brian Galle, Getting Spending: How to Replace Clear Statement Rules with Clear Thinking About Conditional Grants of Federal Funds, 37 CONN. L. REV. 155, 209-10 (2004); Cass Sunstein, Interest Groups in American Public Law, 38 STAN. L. REV. 29, 33, 49-59 (1985). There may also be other ways to describe this concept.


7 See Galle, supra note 5, at 185-86.


disclosed about the performance of the parties to the agreement,\textsuperscript{11} or merely by mutual interest in its continued existence. The rules for each of these enforcement functions, too, vary widely.

Again, the pre-constitutional era showed us that the institutional design of our interstate arrangements can be crucial to their success or failure. If we choose unwisely, we may end up with a problem worse than the one we started out to solve.

This Article does not attempt a grand, high-level theory of interstate institutions. Others have undertaken that mission, often impressively.\textsuperscript{12} My focus, instead, is much closer to the ground. I want to get at how, in actual practice, we can apply the theory of institutional design to particular challenges in interstate coordination. In order to do that, I have adopted a case study approach. I take a single policy challenge and describe existing state and federal efforts to address it. Then, I unpack those existing efforts and, using what we know about how institutions work, try to rebuild them to better realize the policy goal. In the process, I uncover several significant, generalizable lessons about the pragmatics of institutional design. The policy challenge I have selected is a timely one: the threat posed to state and local budgets by sales into their jurisdictions from far away, particularly in the fast-growing area of sales over the Internet.\textsuperscript{13}


The rise of electronic commerce is something like the global warming of state finance. That is, it is a problem of the states’ own making that is not urgent now but may in the near future leave them deep underwater. The states, of course, did not invent the Internet. But it is largely their own fault that the exploding market for goods and services sold over the Internet may put them in dire financial straits. Fortunately, the states may have a serviceable patch already on its way, called the Streamlined Sales and Use Tax Agreement (“SSUTA” or the “Agreement”). Unfortunately, as I will try to show, in its present form the SSUTA faces many serious challenges.

Why does e-commerce affect state budgets? States depend heavily on sales and use tax revenues — some states draw upwards of forty percent of their revenues from them. Although e-commerce is still a relatively small portion of total nationwide retail sales, in nominal terms the figures are already very substantial and the proportion is growing quickly. As the United States transitions to a knowledge-based economy, more and more of what we produce that is of value to consumers will be readily ordered or acquired from our computer chair or our set-top cable box. Current estimates of e-commerce costs to the states over the next few years range from a few billion to tens of billions of dollars. If states continue to depend on sales taxes

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15 A “use” tax is simply a tax imposed on the in-state use of a good or service purchased out of state; it is designed to make state purchasers indifferent between purchasing in and out of state.
18 For instance, the percentage of e-commerce as a portion of all retail sales roughly tripled between 2000 and 2005, and grew at a fairly steady rate throughout that period. U.S. Census Bureau, Quarterly Retail E-Commerce Sales 2nd Quarter 2005, at 1 (Aug. 19, 2005), available at http://www.census.gov/mrts/www/data/pdf/05Q2.pdf.
19 See Walter Hellerstein, Jurisdiction to Tax Income and Consumption in the New Economy: A Theoretical and Comparative Perspective, 38 GA. L. REV. 1, 41-42 (2003); Houghton & Hellerstein, supra note 13, at 12.
to fund a substantial portion of their revenues, they will have to find ways to tax these transactions.

Unfortunately, the states have made it hard on themselves in that regard. Over the past few decades, the U.S. Supreme Court has interpreted the Dormant Commerce Clause to dramatically limit the authority of states and other local taxing jurisdictions to oblige non-local sellers to collect sales and use taxes.\footnote{TODAY, Oct. 27, 2003, ¶ 17 (summarizing competing estimates).} In essence, only sellers with a “physical presence” in the jurisdiction need comply with the jurisdiction’s demands.\footnote{See infra text accompanying notes 34-49.} That rule, arguably, arose in response to the states’ irresponsibility in allowing a bewildering array of state and local sales tax rules to develop — more than 7,000 sets of distinct rules at last count.\footnote{See Quill Corp. v. North Dakota, 504 U.S. 298, 311-15 (1992).} The Court, in turn, seems to have felt compelled to protect the constitutional guarantee of an open market for domestic goods from the threat of diminished interstate trade that would result from rules so cumbersome in their multiplicity.

The Court’s interpretation of the Dormant Commerce Clause, however, can be superseded by Congress. Thus, in the last several years the states have developed the SSUTA, a multilateral agreement among states designed to harmonize their sales tax systems in exchange for congressional authorization to impose collection obligations on out-of-state sellers.\footnote{ADVISORY COMM’N ON ELEC. COMMERCE, REPORT TO CONGRESS 17 (2000), available at http://www.ecommercecommission.org/acec_report.pdf.} It is a tremendous and impressive undertaking. But it has some potential flaws. Quite possibly, the same political and social forces that melted our fiscal ice caps will keep the states from genuinely reforming.

To be more specific, I argue that the design of the Agreement leaves itself open to political influence by the very stakeholders who have driven state tax disuniformity. Local businesses have powerful incentives, and ample opportunity within the relatively weak anti-discrimination protections of the Court’s tax Commerce Clause jurisprudence, to shape local tax policies to favor themselves. The Agreement, as currently proposed, sets out a model code for each state to enact and interpret independently, with the threat of some sanction if they stray too far from the collective ideal.\footnote{See infra text accompanying notes 55-70.} But the sanction mechanism depends on a three-quarters vote from the members of the
Agreement, each of whom is represented largely by political appointees from their home states, removable at the discretion of state political actors. Through logrolling and similar devices, member states are very likely to escape any punishment for deviation and, knowing this, will be free to give heed to the cohesive, aggressive demands of in-state businesses. State-by-state judicial review will be unlikely to constrain state heterodoxy, as judges will either themselves be politically dependent or, if independent, unconcerned with the threat of sanctions.

Thus, I argue that the SSUTA can only succeed if its Governing Board is reformed in a way that allows it to influence apolitical state courts, and if the stakeholders who influence political decisions internalize the costs of state disuniformity. These considerations, I show, are related. Therefore, I suggest a possible improvement on the current design, proposing that the federal deductibility of a state’s corporate taxes be made contingent on a U.S. Treasury determination that the state is in compliance with the SSUTA. The deduction helps make certain that in-state businesses, who I claim are the driving forces of disuniformity, have a genuine reason to want the SSUTA to succeed. If the Board, freed from these influences, can then produce opinions that rest on principled application of the Agreement’s nationalizing goals rather than parochial advantage, it has a hope of swaying state judicial opinion to its way of thinking. Federal judicial review, although problematic in itself, can supplement both ends if supported by expert federal agency judgment.

This analysis also gives us important clues about the larger puzzle of the design of interstate institutions. Attempting to reform a system upon which the states’ fiscal future depends is itself, of course, an important goal. But I also try to show that a close analysis of the SSUTA, and of potential amendments to it, demonstrates the weaknesses of some traditional approaches to coordinating state and federal policy. In particular, I claim that this case study is strong evidence of the need for a “refereed federalism.” This is a vision of federalism in which a system of officials, whose incentives are balanced and attuned to screen out imperfections in the political market, manage and channel the experimentation and competition between thousands of local jurisdictions. My conclusion has important implications for judicial efforts to impose national standards in such diverse fields as state business tax incentives and criminal procedure.

26 SSUTA, supra note 14, §§ 805, 809.
Part I of this Article describes the evolution of federal limits on state power to tax sales originating in another jurisdiction, as well as the shape of the SSUTA that developed in response. Part II begins diagnosing the institutional design problem that must be overcome by providing an overview of the political economy of state sales and use taxation. Parts III and IV describe what I see as the central obstacles for the SSUTA's success: in large measure, its failure to resolve the difficulties uncovered in Part II. Part V describes my solution, and how it addresses the structural failings uncovered earlier. In the Conclusion, I examine our lessons learned for similar projects in other fields.

I. AN OVERVIEW

In order to understand the SSUTA, it is helpful to first explore some of the factors that make the Agreement necessary. The most immediate impetus for the Streamlined Sales Tax Project was probably the Supreme Court's decision in Quill Corp. v. North Dakota. In Quill, the Court held that the Commerce Clause prohibits a state or local taxing jurisdiction from imposing an obligation to collect sales or use tax on a vendor whose only “physical presence” in the jurisdiction is the travel of its goods by common carrier to its customers. Although the Court's ultimate rationale is open to question, it seems clear that at least one of the opinion's major determinants was that forcing mail order sellers to cope with the different taxing rules of literally thousands of different taxing jurisdictions was inconsistent with the Commerce Clause's goal of creating a free, open market for domestic goods. In this Part, I describe the development of the Quill rule, and the design of the Agreement that the states developed in response.

27 That is, the Project that gave rise to development of the SSUTA. See John A. Swain & Walter Hellerstein, The Political Economy of the Streamlined Sales and Use Tax Agreement, 58Nat'l Tax J. 605, 609-10 (2005).
29 Id. at 311-15.
A. “Black Letter” Law

At the time of Quill, the United States included approximately 6,000
distinct sets of local tax rules. 31 Even where those rules were facially
similar, each jurisdiction could litigate the application of its terms,
such as whether a particular item or bundle of items was “tangible
personal property” or used in “manufacturing.” 32 Each jurisdiction, in
theory, could have its own forms, and the authority to audit sellers to
ensure that they were properly collecting sales and use taxes.
Understandably, nationwide sellers complained — and still complain
— that the burden of complying with this welter of rules could be
substantial.33

Ultimately, the proliferation of tax rules and burdens had additional
legal consequences. Through the middle of the twentieth century, the
Supreme Court imposed fairly drastic limits on a state’s power to tax
interstate commerce, using not only the Commerce Clause (or its
negative implications) but also the Due Process Clause.34 In a series
of early cases, the Court held that due process limited a state’s
jurisdiction to impose taxes, as well as the obligation to collect taxes
on its behalf, only to entities having sufficient “nexus” with the taxing
state.35 Generally, in order to meet this standard, the state had to
show that the entity had some “definite link” or “minimum
connection” with the state, which it could satisfy by demonstrating a
physical presence within its borders.36 Similarly, on the Commerce
Clause side, the Court often refused to allow “direct” taxes on
interstate commerce, although it was never entirely clear what
separated direct from indirect taxes.37

By 1977, though, both ends of the doctrine had been largely
transformed, setting the stage for a potential revolution in state taxing

31 See Quill, 504 U.S. at 313 n.6.
32 Isaacson, supra note 20, ¶ 13. Isaacson represents the Direct Marketing
Association, a trade group of remote-selling merchants. Id. ¶ 1.
33 See id. ¶ 10; Charles E. McClure, Jr., Radical Reform of the States’ Sales and Use
Tax: Achieving Simplicity, Economic Neutrality, and Fairness, 13 HARV. J.L. & TECH.
34 E.g., Nat’l Bellas Hess, Inc. v. Dept’ of Revenue, 386 U.S. 753, 756-57 (1967);
Spector Motor Serv., Inc. v. O’Connor, 340 U.S. 602, 608-09 (1951); Freeman v.
Court’s prior decisions limiting state power to impose tax).
36 Id.; see Nat’l Bellas Hess, 386 U.S. at 756.
37 Freeman, 329 U.S. at 252. On the uncertain doctrinal meaning of “direct” and
“indirect” taxes in this context, see generally Noel T. Dowling, Interstate Commerce
power. The reach of a state court's jurisdiction had expanded, so that even in suits in rem it could reach any entity with minimum contacts, ties, or relations to it.38 In the commerce arena, the Court had rejected formalism in favor of a practical test that appeared to guard primarily against unfair or discriminatory tax regimes.39 It appeared, then, that in the future there would be few barriers to states imposing fairly apportioned and non-discriminatory taxes or tax-collection obligations, even on those who sold largely from out of state. Although the Court's restatement of the Commerce Clause test for permissible taxes included a requirement of “substantial nexus,”40 it seemed plausible that the Court meant only the minimal nexus imposed by the Due Process Clause.41

The 1992 Quill case dashed those expectations. The Quill Court, as I have mentioned, held that the substantial nexus test demands some physical presence in a state before the state can collect, or demand help in collecting, sales or use taxes from a seller.42 Quill acknowledged that under the Due Process Clause, states were free to impose such a tax.43 However, the Court held that substantial nexus also embodied Dormant Commerce Clause “concerns about the national economy.”44 In particular, it explained that the substantial nexus test “limit[s] the reach of state taxing authority so as to ensure that state taxation does not unduly burden interstate commerce.”45 In the threat of imposing compliance obligations with “6,000-plus taxing jurisdictions,” the Court found a serious likelihood that vesting jurisdiction to tax in every one of those jurisdictions would burden

40 Id. at 279.
41 Id. at 307.
42 Id. at 312-13.
43 Id. at 313.
44 Id. at 307.
45 Id. at 312-13.
the activities of interstate vendors. Its solution was to preserve a pre-1977 “bright-line rule,” setting out a sales and use tax “safe harbor for vendors whose only connection with customers in the taxing state is by common carrier or the United States mail.” Diversity now had its price: in many cases, states would be forced to tax in-state businesses more heavily than out-of-state sellers. In addition, the Court’s resolution left it rather uncertain what precisely substantial nexus would require under any other circumstances, including any other form of tax.

The explicit shift, however, to a pure Commerce Clause rationale had its own important implications. As the Court repeatedly emphasized, Congress has the power to overrule its Dormant Commerce Clause determinations. Indeed, the Court all but handed Congress an invitation, explaining that it was overruling any earlier implication that the Due Process Clause might stand in Congress’s way, and concluding, “Congress is now free to decide whether, when, and to what extent the states may burden interstate mail-order concerns with a duty to collect use taxes.”

B. The States Respond: The SSUTA

Although Quill was technically a loss for the states, the opinion offered local taxing authorities a potential path to jurisdiction over out-of-state sellers. Over the ensuing decade and beyond, the states

46 Id. at 313 & n.6. For a summary of empirical studies showing the welfare effects of growing tax regime disparities, see Bartley Hildreth et al., Cooperation or Competition: The Multistate Tax Commission and State Corporate Tax Uniformity, 38 ST. TAX NOTES 827, 836-38 (2005). The authors conclude that the available evidence shows measurable but rather modest costs associated with the existing pre-SSUTA arrangements. Id. As Daniel Shaviro notes, however, these types of estimates for the most part fail to include additional social costs, such as tax planning, litigation, and lobbying. Daniel Shaviro, An Economic and Political Look at Federalism in Taxation, 90 MICH. L. REV. 895, 920 (1992).

47 Quill, 504 U.S. at 313-14 (quoting Nat’l Bellas Hess, Inc. v. Dep’t of Rev., 386 U.S. 753 (1967)).


50 See, e.g., Quill, 504 U.S. at 318.

51 Id.; see id. at 320 (Scalia, J., concurring); id. at 333 (White, J., concurring).
developed a two-pronged strategy to realize the opportunity the Court had extended. First, the states crafted a compact, the SSUTA, in which they sought to harmonize much of what had grown disparate within their taxing systems. And, critically, they sought congressional authorization under the Commerce Clause to require sellers to collect their sales and use taxes.

The structure and history of the SSUTA are described thoroughly elsewhere, so I mention only a few brief highlights here. The Agreement is a voluntary compact among the member states. Membership is contingent on approval by existing members. Approval is formally granted through the principle governing entity of the Agreement, known as the Governing Board. I review details of the Board’s composition in considerable length throughout Parts III and IV.

Substantively, the Agreement obliges would-be member states to enact a variety of amendments to their own statutes or constitutions. Perhaps most significantly, the Agreement sets out a “library” of putatively uniform definitions for the myriad of items that could be subject to sales tax. States must then establish a tax “matrix” in which they check off which of the library items they will tax. A state cannot impose a tax on any item that would also be covered by a library definition unless it defines that item in the same terms as the library’s definition. States can have only a select number of tax rates, including rates imposed by sub-state entities such as cities or counties. Furthermore, the states must adopt uniform administrative procedures, set out in the Agreement. The Board will contract with software developers to produce easy-to-use computer software to incorporate all of the choices and rates set out by each state and

52 See Swain & Hellerstein, supra note 27, at 609-10.
53 See Hellerstein & Swain, supra note 24, at 10-1 to -2.
54 Walter Hellerstein and John Swain, in fact, have already prepared a brief treatise describing the SSUTA. Hellerstein & Swain, supra note 24.
55 Id. at 3-2 to -3.
56 SSUTA, supra note 14, § 801.
57 Id.
58 Hellerstein & Swain, supra note 24, at 3-3.
59 SSUTA, supra note 14, §§ 302, 316; id. app. C.
60 Hellerstein & Swain, supra note 24, at 7-12.
61 SSUTA, supra note 14, § 304.
62 Id. § 308.
63 E.g., id. §§ 317-20, 322, 324, 401-04. Each state also can only have one auditing authority. Id. § 301.
locality, hopefully allowing any out-of-state merchant to comply easily with the tax rules of every jurisdiction.  

The Agreement has no formal legal status. That is, there is no SSUTA equivalent of the Supremacy Clause. As with other model codes, once states have enacted their mirror provisions into law those provisions simply become part of each jurisdiction’s statutory or constitutional scheme. In order to obtain membership, however, a new member state must show “substantial compliance” with the existing Agreement. The Governing Board has power to sanction, by a three-quarters vote, any existing member who goes out of substantial compliance. I discuss this mechanism in more detail below.

Finally, the Agreement anticipates that it will be complemented later by federal legislation. Several such bills have been proposed during recent congressional terms, although none has yet passed. Federal legislation would largely overrule Quill, granting SSUTA member states jurisdiction to impose tax collection obligations on sellers regardless of their “nexus” with the taxing state. Various iterations of the legislation have also added some wrinkles to the Agreement’s structure, such as a provision for federal judicial review of Board decisions.

II. THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF TAX CHAOS

In order to appraise whether the SSUTA is likely to succeed or fail in its goal of nationwide uniformity we first have to understand the forces that produced the current disuniformity. In one sense, the diversity of state and local sales tax rules is by design. The Constitution largely preserved state autonomy to tax, albeit often subject to congressional oversight. There are good, familiar policy reasons for that decision. States will distribute needs and resources

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64 Hellerstein & Swain, supra note 24, at 7-25 to -30.
65 See id. at 3-2 to -3; Isaacson, supra note 20, ¶ 10.
66 SSUTA, supra note 14, § 801.
67 Id. §§ 805, 809.
69 See McClure & Hellerstein, supra note 48, ¶¶ 13-14.
71 See McClure & Hellerstein, supra note 48, ¶ 3 (summarizing proposed legislation).
differently, such that the most efficient tax base may vary by region.\textsuperscript{72} Tax and spending decisions often reflect an underlying notion of distributive justice.\textsuperscript{73} In a federal system where citizens are fairly mobile and local government is reasonably democratic, we can likely best enable everyone to live under their own ideals of justice if we allow sub-national units to make tax policy based on their notions of justice.\textsuperscript{74} In that way, citizens can shop for and live within the model that best fits their preferences.

Even if we think norms of justice are or ought to be relatively uniform nationwide, tax federalism has experimental benefits. It is worth describing these in some detail, because their significance is largely overlooked in \textit{Quill}. In the “Tiebout” model of interstate competition, parallel state efforts to reach similar policy goals put competitive pressure on states to retain citizens and attract capital.\textsuperscript{75}

\textsuperscript{72} For example, if our goal is to maximize total utility across a community, we can produce more utility by more heavily taxing those whose utility curve is more inelastic relative to income, and transferring the resources to those whose curves are more elastic. See Richard A. Musgrave & Peggy B. Musgrave, \textit{Public Finance in Theory and Practice} 277-95 (5th ed. 1989). It is possible that utility curves are more consistent, or are more measurable, by region rather than nationally.

\textsuperscript{73} See, e.g., Michael J. Graetz & Alvin C. Warren, Jr., \textit{Income Tax Discrimination and the Political and Economic Integration of Europe}, 115 \textit{Yale L.J.} 1186, 1231 (2006).


\textsuperscript{75} See Advisory Comm’n on Intergovernmental Relations, \textit{Interjurisdictional Tax and Policy Competition: Good or Bad for the Federal System?} 60-63 (1991); William A. Fischel, \textit{The Homevoter Hypothesis: How Home Values Influence Local Government Taxation, School Finance, and Land Use Policies}, at ix (2001); Abraham Bell & Gideon Parchomovsky, \textit{Of Property and Federalism}, 115 \textit{Yale L.J.} 72, 103 (2005); Robert P. Inman & Daniel L. Rubinfeld, \textit{The Political Economy of Federalism}, in \textit{Perspectives on Public Choice} 73, 83-85 (Dennis C. Mueller ed., 1997). The “Tiebout” theory originates with Charles M. Tiebout, \textit{A Pure Theory of Local Expenditures}, 64 \textit{J. Pol. Econ.} 416 (1956), and there is a voluminous literature criticizing, defending, and applying it. Among other criticisms, later commentators complain that the model assumes, probably counter-factually, that there are enough different “bundles” of government services that an individual’s choice to live or invest in any one jurisdiction reveals his or her preference about only a single policy choice in the bundle. E.g., Susan Rose-Ackerman, \textit{Tiebout Models and the Competitive Ideal: An Essay on the Political Economy of Local Government}, in 1 \textit{Perspectives on Local Public Finance and Public Policy} 23, 28 (1983). Another critique objects that individuals, and some capital, are not mobile enough to produce competitive pressures, an argument I discuss briefly in the main text. See Shaviro, supra note 46, at 907, 964. There also are a number of potential vices associated with competition, which it is not my intention to dwell on extensively here. But, among other claims, competition in a system in which some governments have unequal resources may distort the market for good government. See Richard Briffault, \textit{Our Localism}:
Entrepreneurial politicians can win rewards by eliminating inefficiencies or borrowing best practices from elsewhere.\textsuperscript{76} By attracting capital and retaining productive taxpayers, politicians are able to deliver more services, thereby making voters happy and ensuring re-election or election to higher office.\textsuperscript{77} Even in a system in which taxpayer mobility is fairly limited, there can still be competitive pressures. For example, high-earning taxpayers could merely threaten to exit in order extract rents. Doing so would leave local politicians in the position of having either to deliver rents and reduce the quality of services delivered to everyone else, or refuse to give in and face the chance of sending a strong negative signal — exit by the most successful taxpayers — to their constituents.\textsuperscript{78} To avoid that position, the politician must make certain that her jurisdiction is so obviously better than the alternatives that threats to leave are not credible. In theory, then, state diversity can lead to efficiency gains for the whole system.\textsuperscript{79}

Diversity may also be costly or undesirable, however. For instance, familiarity is a virtue. That is, it may be more costly for an outsider to analyze a new set of rules, or to learn to comply with them, than any


\textsuperscript{79} There is a spirited debate among economists concerning whether federalism in fact results in more efficient delivery of government services, particularly those that redistribute resources. Economists who believe that local services are inefficient argue that the benefits of competition and experimentation are outweighed by deadweight losses that result from the costs taxpayers incur in researching competing jurisdictions and relocating. For summaries by some of the primary combatants, see Wallace E. Oates, Fiscal Competition and European Union: Contrasting Perspectives, 31 Regional Sci. & Urb. Econ. 133-45 (2001); George R. Zodrow, Tax Competition and Tax Coordination in the European Union, 10 Int'l Tax & Pub. Fin. 651-71 (2003); John Douglas Wilson & David E. Wildasin, Tax Competition: Bane or Boom? (2001), available at http://davidwildasin.us/pub/Wilson-Wildasin.pdf. I take no particular position in that debate here. However, I do argue later that the possibility that inter-jurisdictional competition could be beneficial, and the complexity that evidently surrounds any true measure of that benefit, are reasons why we need to design a policymaking structure that is capable of analyzing the question thoroughly and openly.
savings from an “improved” rule could generate. As Professor Daniel Shaviro explains, each new set of tax rules and enforcement procedures creates additional costs for multi-jurisdictional sellers across the nation, some of them simply deadweight losses, so that diversity may lower nationwide wealth and increase costs for consumers.80 In addition, we expect diversity and experimentation to converge on more uniform best practices as states copy the superior efforts of their competitors.81 For example, although states compete to develop the most attractive sets of tort and contract law, over time there will be pressure on states to adopt the model that is most effective in attracting capital and taxpayers.82 Therefore, it may be puzzling why state and local taxation is so disuniform.

Shaviro, though, offers a compelling account of the political economy of disuniformity. The key to his analysis is his observation that voters and purely in-state businesses do not fully internalize the benefits of a uniform set of national rules because the gains of that benefit are distributed nationally.83 That is, the benefit of a marginal increase in uniformity to the in-state actor is not congruent with the benefit that same increase in uniformity produces for the nation as a whole.84 Therefore, when weighing the gains of uniformity against disparate policies that benefit only them, local voters will not act in a way that maximizes overall social welfare.

Moreover, as Shaviro also explains, even if each individual voter fully realized the gains of national uniformity, his or her political representatives might not.85 Public choice theory predicts that government officials respond not only to the number of voters who prefer an outcome but also to the intensity of their expressed preferences.86

80 Shaviro, supra note 46, at 919-21, 925-26.
83 Shaviro, supra note 46, at 957-58; see McClure & Hellerstein, supra note 48, ¶ 25 (arguing that essential problem SSUTA is designed to confront is that states do not bear vendors’ cost of complying with differing tax regimes).
84 See A.C. PIGOU, THE ECONOMICS OF WELFARE 172-83 (1920).
85 Shaviro, supra note 46, at 931-32, 955-59.
preference.86 Where the gains or harms of a problem are spread widely and thinly, each affected individual is unlikely to recognize the problem. They will be inclined to assume that someone else will be motivated to solve it, and, even if aware of and motivated by the issue, may find it difficult to find others who feel similarly with whom to form a coalition.87 Because the costs of disuniform or unpredictable laws are spread widely and thinly, neither uniformity nor reasoned consistency are apt to generate intense voter interest.88 Thus, the beneficiaries of uniformity often lose out to those who can realize greater gains from disparate set of rules.

Although Shaviro does not fully develop how this analysis plays out in the specific context of sales and use taxes, it is not difficult to construct scenarios in which differing local rules could disproportionately benefit a local constituency.89 One involves preserving a “home-field advantage.” Consider Jurisdiction A. Existing merchants in A would certainly benefit from the opportunity to sell in neighboring jurisdictions B and C without having to study and adapt to new rules. But the merchants in A want B and C to abide by A’s rules, not the other way around.90 They are already experts in A’s rules, while new competitors will have to adapt. The A merchants may already have designed their existing business processes to maximize profits under A’s rules, and these rules may represent the long-term efforts of A merchants to extract favorable rules from A politicians.91 Further, A’s rules might be explicitly protectionist in that they may be designed to favor the A merchants’ manner of doing business over others. For many A businesses, losing all of these benefits is likely to be much more costly to A merchants than gaining access to other markets. At the same time, A’s politicians may be

88 Shaviro, supra note 46, at 931-32.
89 Shaviro does mention in passing the possibility of “inducing state tax competition to provide investment incentives,” which could presumably include exemptions from sales tax. Id. at 958.
perfectly happy that disuniformities make it harder to move from jurisdiction to jurisdiction because that helps to lock in A businesses, insulating the politicians from the danger that valuable business will flee elsewhere or demand more rents.

Similarly, state tax bases might change frequently in order to maximize tax-exporting opportunities. All else being equal, we would expect state actors to try to shift the burden of paying for their government services onto others.\textsuperscript{92} It is not surprising that Delaware is funded heavily by corporate registration fees and tolls at the Delaware Memorial Bridge, or that Florida employs hotel and sales taxes instead of an income tax.\textsuperscript{93} Assuming the tactics mentioned above are not perfectly successful in preventing business and labor from migrating and developing,\textsuperscript{94} state legislatures might rationally shift bases in order to maximize the extent to which the state can impose a heavier burden on out-of-state actors.\textsuperscript{95} Alternately, as


\textsuperscript{94} If businesses can easily relocate, tax exporting is unlikely to work because the out-of-state business will simply move to avoid efforts to impose tax on it.

\textsuperscript{95} See Shaviro, \textit{supra} note 48, at 282, 288-89. The Supreme Court’s Commerce Clause tax cases, in theory, are supposed to limit state opportunities to discriminate against outsiders. As a practical matter, though, there are many tax rules that are not facially discriminatory, and can pass Commerce Clause scrutiny, but can easily be manipulated to favor the home team. \textit{Id.} The classic example in state taxation is “formulary apportionment,” the method by which states determine what portion of a multi-state corporation’s revenue should be taxed in each jurisdiction. States are permitted to allocate based purely on the proportion of a corporation’s sales in the state, which obviously greatly favors in-state exporters over primarily out-of-state importers. See Multistate Tax Comm’n, \textit{supra} note 20, ¶ 11. In the sales and use tax context, states can simply define their exemptions to leave strong home-town industries lightly taxed. See Hildreth et al., \textit{supra} note 46, at 839. Other popular
Shaviro also suggests, even the illusion of successful exporting may win political rewards for state politicians.96

On the other hand, in the specific context of sales and use taxes we can identify a discrete group that is heavily impacted by disuniformity: large, out-of-state, remote sellers, such as catalog companies and Internet retailers — the Land’s Ends and Amazons of the world. The problem these entities face is that, assuming they can find something other than votes that might be of value to legislators, they still face the immense challenge of monitoring and lobbying simultaneously in thousands of jurisdictions. The conventional solution for groups in that position in the United States has been to seek preemptive federal legislation, so that battles need be fought only in a single arena.97 Here the powerful tradition of (and, arguably, constitutional entitlement to) state tax autonomy may have been an insuperable barrier to that strategy.

Uniformity in tax rules, therefore, may be something of a tragedy of the commons.98 In many situations, uniform rules and open borders are utility-maximizing. But each individual jurisdiction, for political and self-serving economic reasons, can exact greater benefits than other participants by deviating a bit from the uniform system. As each jurisdiction pursues that strategy, the result is mostly deviation and not much uniformity.

III. “NEITHER STREAMLINED NOR AN AGREEMENT: DISCUSS”

The SSUTA, as we saw in Part I, sets up an elaborate structure aimed at bringing uniformity to sales and use taxes. In the last Part, we saw the forces arrayed against the SSUTA’s proponents. The question now

strategies include excluding out-of-state manufacturing from a state exemption for purchases intended for use in manufacturing, a practice that has survived some judicial scrutiny. See, e.g., Concord Publ’g House, Inc. v. Dir. of Revenue, 916 S.W.2d 186, 189-90 (Mo. 1996) (noting, with apparent approval, that manufacturing exemption at issue was intended to “encourage the location and expansion of industry in Missouri”); Sharp v. Tyler Pipe Indus., Inc., 919 S.W.2d 157, 161 (Tex. App. 1996) (same, in Texas).

96 Shaviro, supra note 46, at 956-57.
97 See Macey, supra note 91, at 271-73.
is whether the Agreement, as presently structured, can weather the assault. Thus, in this Part, I consider how the institutions set up by the SSUTA are likely to respond to the political-process pressures we saw in Part II. Based on what we know about the performance of public officials, there seems a strong possibility that they will be susceptible to the same influences that swayed the state legislators who drafted our many diverse sales tax rules.

A. Restarting the Clock?

The central structural challenge for the SSUTA is that it must be enacted, enforced, and interpreted separately in each state. Again, the Agreement functions as a model code; each member state agrees to enact legislation conforming its own code to the definitions and procedures of the SSUTA. The Agreement specifically provides that member states and their officers cannot be sued for failure to conform their law or behavior to it. Despite an admirable effort on the part of the drafters, the SSUTA’s library definitions are not self-interpreting. Even if the terms were so clear as to need no further gloss, facts and circumstances that we cannot anticipate now will arise and demand interpretation. Taxpayers will attempt to find nuances of the terms most favorable to their positions. Those controversies will be resolved like all other tax controversies: they will begin with administrative proceedings before state and local tax authorities, and will be ultimately settled by state courts.

As a result, the SSUTA could potentially reset the clock on state taxing disparities. That is, although it restores an initial state in which all jurisdictions have the same set of taxing rules, over time the rules could again diverge widely. The same forces that pulled our 7,500-plus taxing jurisdictions apart in the first place may well

99 SSUTA, supra note 14, § 1102; see HELLERSTEIN & SWAIN, supra note 24, at 3-2.
100 SSUTA, supra note 14, § 1103(B)-(C).
101 See SSUTA, supra note 14, app. C; HELLERSTEIN & SWAIN, supra note 24, at 4-5; Isaacson, supra note 20, ¶ 10. For example, the Agreement defines one of its most important terms, “tangible personal property,” simply as “personal property that can be seen, weighed, measured, felt, touched, or that is in any other manner perceptible to the senses.” SSUTA, supra note 14, app. C, at 88.
102 See HELLERSTEIN & SWAIN, supra note 24, at 4-5, 4-18 to -20 (noting likelihood that interpreters of SSUTA will confront unforeseen situations).
104 See HELLERSTEIN & SWAIN, supra note 24, at 1-1 (noting that there now are
continue to tug on the agencies and courts to whom the model code is entrusted. Thus, a critical question for supporters of the SSUTA’s general goals is whether the political process flaws Shaviro identified as affecting state legislative outcomes would also bend the path of state agency and court decisions. Skeptics have claimed, with little analysis, that the flaws will in fact infect administration of the SSUTA. But different institutions behave differently. Before making any predictions, we must look closer at the operations of state agencies and state courts.

B. How Will State Agencies Perform?

Let us begin by considering the incentives and other factors that are likely to shape the behavior of state revenue officials. By now it is a familiar point that, although not directly elected, bureaucrats may still be sensitive to political considerations by way of legislative or chief executive influence, in addition to the possibility of direct lobbying.  

"more than 7,500 local taxing jurisdictions".  

105 See Isaacson, supra note 20, ¶ 13.  

Legislatures can control the budget and procedural rules governing bureaucrats, and can use these tools not only to shape deliberative processes but also to offer rewards and punishments. For example, many theorists posit that officials are interested in expanding their own power and influence (whether out of self-aggrandizement or a belief in their mission), and that legislatures use this desire to align bureaucratic with legislative incentives. That would tend to suggest that Shaviro’s predictions about state behavior will also extend to state administration of SSUTA’s terms.

On the other hand, the literature also suggests that there is rarely a complete match between legislative (or even legislative and chief executive) and bureaucratic goals. Some agency personnel may be difficult to monitor, and political actors’ available sanctions may be more costly to the political actor than to the bureaucrat. For instance, some argue that agency personnel have a stronger institutional interest in preserving the long-term financial stability of the state government than their political superiors do. Agency
officials need not balance the need to obtain funds against voter antipathy to taxes, and their job time horizons are much longer.112

Even so, as with the factors Shav iro identified, any bureaucratic preference for healthy revenues over the long term is still likely to favor local taxpayers over out-of-state interests. True, free trade theory predicts that shifting the locality’s tax burden to foreign payers will reduce tax revenues for everyone by degrading the efficiency of the market.113 But that is a very long-term effect,114 which is likely to be considerably outweighed in the middle term by the possibility of raising rates on a constituency that has little political influence. However long the agency time horizon, its members are likely to discount (both rationally and, to some extent, irrationally) the cost of losses in the distant future.115 In some cases, it is likely that immediate rents plus interest will exceed the cost to the state treasury of any inefficiencies.

Other state revenue agency influences also tend to favor in-state actors. For example, administrative scholars generally predict that agencies will often be heavily influenced by the entities they regulate.116 Part of that influence arises from the fact that the regulated entities have knowledge and experience that the agency needs to do its job well. Another part is familiarity, and a significant


112 See id.

113 E.g., PIERRE LORTIE, ECONOMIC INTEGRATION AND THE LAW OF GATT 2 (1975); JACOB VINER, THE CUSTOMS UNION ISSUE 41-56 (1950). I focus here on the effects on the tax base because our working hypothesis is that state officers may be motivated largely by a desire to expand available revenue. Tax exporting, and other locational inefficiencies, create other, larger losses of general societal welfare. Shaviro, supra note 46, at 898-901. Although such losses no doubt affect state revenue officers to some degree, the extent to which they internalize this harm may reflect only a small fraction of its harm to society.


portion is the possibility of some form of payoffs to the regulators.\footnote{117} Local taxpayers can employ all these tools more effectively than their rivals. They will have more knowledge about local conditions, will do business more regularly with their in-state revenue agency than foreign taxpayers, and will be more likely to intervene with political supervisors or offer enticing future employment than the out-of-towners.

At the same time, there is also a thread in the theoretical literature on agency behavior suggesting that bureaucrats respond not purely to incentives but also to their own sense of institutional ideology or mission.\footnote{118} More recent developments in the psychology of public officials offers a causal explanation for the power of an individual's sense of mission, or "role-norm." Both the individual and society may expect certain kinds of behavior from persons who hold that individual's office. The individual may experience shame, embarrassment, fear of lost identity and social status, or cognitive dissonance — all powerful internal forces — when she deviates from those expectations.\footnote{119} Thus, the bureaucrat's perception and internalization of social expectations can lead her to resist entreaties to heed other political forces.\footnote{120}

It is unclear how the influence of institutional norms would likely affect the administration of codified SSUTA provisions. Even if there


\footnote{120 See Suchman & Edelman, *supra* note 119, at 919.}
were a norm that state public servants should regulate in the public interest, it seems doubtful that there would be a clear norm that the public to be served is the nation rather than the state. There seems no apparent reason why the existence of the SSUTA, standing alone, would lead to a norm of national welfare maximization. It is true that laws can probably shape norms significantly, in that they provide a source of expectations about how people will behave, or how it is “right” or “wrong” to behave. Laws also perhaps serve as an heuristic for how we believe other people are behaving.  

However, the SSUTA is, on its face, only a collection of definitions and procedural rules. If it announces a new norm of national tax harmonization, it does so only very subtly. Perhaps congressional approval and state ratifications might contain or be accompanied by powerful, public dedications of commitment to national unity, which could help. And yet, as I have argued elsewhere, norms of commitment to higher principles may dissolve under the pressure of cynicism about public officials’ behavior. For instance, as citizens and officials in State A see that State B is cheating, the expectations for State A officials might swiftly diminish. Developing a strong nationwide norm among state officials could, as a result, be very difficult, because any cracks in the wall might quickly spread. In short, without a strong tool for ensuring nationwide compliance, it seems unlikely that we will see national uniformity develop spontaneously from the behavior of state-level administrators.

C. The Performance of State Courts

The state judiciary may be unlikely to do much better. As other commentators have observed, state courts have their own structural features that tend to incline them towards favoring local interests over national or non-local goods. The vast majority of state courts are


elected, and many state judges depend either on campaign contributions or intensely motivated grassroots support to win elections.124 State judges may, like administrators, prefer empire-building — they would rather make their own doctrine than have to follow a set of rules established by someone else.125 They can then more clearly take credit for the result, especially if it favors their constituency. In addition, assuming the state provides its own forum, there is basically no federal jurisdiction to challenge any aspect of a state tax system.126

State courts do have some defenders, however, including the U.S. Supreme Court. These defenders often insist that state courts are, or must be presumed to be, equally as committed as federal courts to defending federal rights.127 Although they do not generally develop a strong explanation for that assertion, state court defenders claim that state judges are at least as “conscientious” or “principled” as federal judges.128 In other words, the claim of state and federal judicial equivalency is a claim about the common institutional ideology or role-norm of judges. I agree that the process of internalizing rule-of-law norms is largely what we think makes courts act like courts: judges have an ideological or deep psychological commitment to behave the way we expect judges to behave.129 The Supreme Court, as I have argued previously, has labored to control inferior courts by setting out a largely informal code of behavior for judges — an “institutional ideology” of principled behavior it expects judges to follow.130 We can see the Court’s frequent pronouncements that


125 Cf. Graetz & Warren, supra note 73, at 1234 (noting that European supreme courts have refused to send legal questions to European Court of Justice despite treaty obligations to do so); Daryl Levinson, Empire-Building Government in Constitutional Law, 118 Harv. L. Rev. 915, 960-64 (2005) (analyzing possible “empire-building” tendencies of federal judges).


128 E.g., Bator, Finality, supra note 127, at 510-11.

129 Galle, supra note 122, at 177-78, 202-08.

130 Id. at 202-09.
“[s]tate courts, like federal courts, have a constitutional obligation to safeguard personal liberties and to uphold federal law” as part of its general aim to encourage a norm among its lower courts of following established precedent.

Even if the Supreme Court meets its objective effectively, it does not particularly help to maintain sales and use tax uniformity. Once Quill is displaced by the SSUTA, there will be few federal law constraints on the content of state law. As a result, even a very strong norm that state judges must set federal law above local interests will do little to maintain consistency between jurisdictions, unless there is something in the SSUTA itself that requires that. To the extent that the judicial institutional norm is not simply “follow federal law,” but “set national interests above local interests,” it is unclear how much work such a norm can do in resisting local diversification. Remember again that diversity can also be a national good. From the perspective of a single local tax controversy, it will be very unclear whether the additional diversity that would result from a non-uniform decision is a useful experiment or a destructive deviation. Even a very principled nationalist court will often be at a loss as to how national interests should cut in any given sales tax dispute. And, again, state courts may be demoralized by failures of others who, in theory, are supposed to comply with the same set of national-interest norms.

D. The Risk of Sanctions as Reform

The SSUTA does offer a pair of mechanisms apparently aimed at containing these problems. Both, however, have their own vulnerabilities. First, under Article IX of the Agreement, states or other persons or entities can petition the Governing Board to issue a definition or refine a definition of any disputed term. In addition, the Board has the power to find that a member state is not substantially compliant with the Agreement, and to impose an appropriate sanction.

The difficulty for Article IX is that states, including state courts and state agencies, are not bound by the Board’s determinations. States are

132 SSUTA, supra note 14, § 903.
133 Id. §§ 805, 809, 1002. The SSUTA’s sanction provision recognizes what is probably a basic fact of economic life: if states act in their own self-interest and have opportunities to capture rents by defecting from an agreement, they probably will do so unless there is a counter-balancing incentive. See Hildreth et al., supra note 46, at 841.
not obliged to codify new interpretations under Article IX. Nor do state courts or administrators need to agree with the Board’s views. This is not to say that Article IX opinions will be useless, but much may depend on the form and quality of Governing Board decision-making. Obviously a well-reasoned, persuasive, and objective opinion will be more likely to induce state courts to follow it, if for no other reason than that a dissenting court will have a correspondingly high rhetorical burden to articulate an opposing view.

On a more fundamental level, a highly “principled” Board likely will be far more effective than one that is ruled simply by competing political impulses. Suppose again that state courts, perhaps even state taxing authorities, are similarly principled. There is a good argument that the Board’s judgments will be more persuasive to such a body if the judgments are recognizably based on the same sorts of considerations that the body itself entertains — their judgments are obviously legal and not political. The difference here is similar to the difference between citing a sister circuit’s decision in a brief as persuasive authority, and citing public opinion poll results on the same subject. The principled court believes, rightly or wrongly, that it engages in legal reasoning, and will have to directly engage arguments presented in the same mode. A principled approach also makes it easier for state courts to resist local political pressure to reach an outcome different from the Board’s. Such an approach allows the court to claim that it is simply following the law rather than enacting the political preferences of an out-of-state majority. We can see something of the same effect in courts’ tendencies to find administrative decisions that remain constant over time more “persuasive.” That rule helps to protect private planning, of

134 See HELLERSTEIN & SWAIN, supra note 24, at 4-5.


136 By “principled” here I mean the capacity to make decisions based on reasoned elaboration from prevailing authority, constrained by lexical and logical bounds of prior elaborations.


138 See, e.g., United States v. Mead Corp., 533 U.S. 218, 228 (2001) (stating that courts may find non-binding agency interpretation more persuasive if agency has consistently adhered to position over time); EEOC v. Arabian Am. Oil Co., 499 U.S. 244, 256-58 (1991) (same).
but it also reflects a judgment that a consistent position across administrations evinces a more principled stand rather than a convenient political one. In any event, it remains the case that even a highly principled Board with highly principled state courts can at most expect to be highly persuasive, not controlling.

The Board’s persuasiveness will be further constrained by an ambiguity in its fundamental structure. If we look to how courts (federal courts, at least) have treated other institutions’ interpretations of the other institutions’ own judgments, we see two main threads. One thread follows the legislative history paradigm. Courts typically accord little weight to the views of a subsequent Congress about the meaning of an earlier enactment.140 Another thread is agency interpretations of the agency’s own rule, where, in contrast, the agency will usually receive overwhelming deference.141 The difference is basically one of judicial attitudes about the appropriate scope of the other institution’s authority. If we want the institution to move slowly, to deliberate carefully, and to reach specific agreement before its rules can take effect, we give little heed to opinions issuing from only a portion of the body, especially those attempting to modify the meaning of earlier, more formal enactments.142 If we prefer flexibility and quick responses, with not as much regard for transparency, we allow easy, informal modifications.143 It is not particularly evident from the SSUTA’s design which model the states had in mind. At a minimum, then, we should expect some courts to take a “legislative history” approach, and give relatively little weight to Article IX opinions.

Of course, the Board is not limited to speaking softly; it also can sanction states it finds not substantially compliant with the

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139 See, e.g., Zenith Radio Corp. v. United States, 437 U.S. 443, 457-58 (1978) (declaring that, because of reliance interests, courts should not lightly upset longstanding administrative interpretation of a statute); Thomas W. Merrill, Judicial Deference to Executive Precedent, 101 YALE L.J. 969, 1028-29 (1992) (arguing that respect for existing executive interpretations enhances predictability and protects reliance interests).


141 E.g., Gonzalez v. Oregon, 126 S. Ct. 904, 914 (2006) (“An administrative rule may receive substantial deference if it interprets the issuing agency’s own ambiguous regulation.” (citing Auer v. Robbins, 519 U.S. 452, 461-63 (1997))).


Presumably, Article IX rulings could be used in concert with the substantial compliance power to assure that, even as the world changes, the essence of the underlying SSUTA remains fairly constant. Much therefore turns on the form and efficacy of the Board’s sanctions. If the main effect of a sanction is political, and courts are apolitical, they may be largely indifferent to sanction. If our target is political courts or revenue authorities, we have to determine what the relevant constituency for those entities is and what size and sort of sanction will be sufficient to move them to invoke their influence with the relevant state decision-makers. Most importantly, the Board must have the capacity to make these determinations and the political will to follow them through.

In addition to persuading or providing incentives, the Board may also have the capacity to affect the norms of state-level actors. As we saw, the power to curb the occasional bad actor, and the expectation that that power will be exercised, may play an important role in sustaining developing norms of national interest among state officials and judges. Also, prominent sanctions such as criminal penalties may serve their own norming function. There is, however, a countervailing risk that sanctions might simply increase the salience (that is, the visibility) of non-compliance by the sanctioned parties, or “crowd out” individuals’ desire to comply, absent the threat of sanction. In any event, there also may be a substantial danger that if the Board members are parochial or self-serving in their sanction decisions, they will offer a highly salient example of regionalism that could undermine efforts to develop a nationalist norm in the states.

Thus, whatever we think of the principle or political dependence of state interpreters, the long-term prospects for uniformity under the SSUTA appear to depend largely on how the Governing Board functions. I turn there in the next Part.

IV. CAN THE GOVERNING BOARD GOVERN?

The central challenge for the SSUTA, again, is that it does not create a single sales and use tax code, but rather fifty parallel (albeit initially
very similar) codes. As I have suggested, that may not be a serious problem if there is effective centralized coordination and oversight. Unfortunately, as I outline here, the current design for the SSUTA’s central authority, the Governing Board, does not promise attractive results.

A. The Board’s Operations: The Mechanics

It may be helpful at this point to review the structure of the Governing Board. The Board is governed not only by the Agreement itself, but also by a set of Bylaws as well as an evolving list of “Rules and Procedures.” The Board is comprised of up to four representatives from each member state, with each state receiving only one vote. The member states, it appears, are free to decide for themselves how to select the Board member representatives, but the expectation (and current reality) is that most are elected state officials or revenue commissioners. Compliance Review Committee representatives “must be executive or legislative branch employees of the member state.” Board representatives are not compensated, but can receive reimbursement for their expenses.

At present, the Board’s decision-making mechanisms are only drafted at a minimal, bare bones level. Requests for interpretation are forwarded to a Compliance Review and Interpretations Committee for recommendations to the Board. The Committee must solicit comments from the states and the general public. All final decisions are public and posted on the Board’s website. Any interpretations must be adopted by a three-quarters vote of the Board. For the most
part, the Board’s meetings must be open.\textsuperscript{156} The Board has the authority, as yet unexercised, to create an issue resolution procedure, including the use of non-binding arbitration.\textsuperscript{157} The Board must still vote to approve any recommendation produced by its resolution procedures.\textsuperscript{158}

The sanctions process is similarly sketchy. The only sanction specifically mentioned is expulsion from the Agreement, although the Board has authority to impose “other penalties as determined by the governing board.”\textsuperscript{159} It also takes a three-quarters vote of all member states to impose any sanction.\textsuperscript{160} Crucially, a state can be sanctioned only where it is not compliant with the Agreement’s requirements.\textsuperscript{161} States must certify annually that they are in compliance, and the Board is supposed to develop procedures for responding to a state’s admission that it is not in compliance.\textsuperscript{162} A state is in compliance when it is substantially compliant with the Agreement.\textsuperscript{163}

\textbf{B. The Flaws}

This combination of a three-quarters vote requirement and a substantial compliance standard for imposing penalties rather obviously portends a fairly sluggish enforcement operation. By itself, though, that is not necessarily a fatal flaw. As discussed earlier, there is a fair argument that courts or even state revenue agencies could independently pursue a fair degree of uniformity if there were strong, principled leadership from the Governing Board.\textsuperscript{164} It might not matter that the Board moves slowly and seldom, if it moves wisely. I am skeptical, however, that in its current design it is likely to do so. I see four broad sets of problems.

First, political process failures at the state level may be readily transmitted to the Board by way of individual states’ influence over their Board representatives. Board members apparently serve at the pleasure of the appointing state.\textsuperscript{165} Administrative law scholars argue

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{156} SSUTA Rules, \textit{supra} note 147, § 807.1(B)(1).
  \item \textsuperscript{157} SSUTA, \textit{supra} note 14, § 1001.
  \item \textsuperscript{158} \textit{Id.} § 1003.
  \item \textsuperscript{159} \textit{Id.} § 809.
  \item \textsuperscript{160} \textit{Id.}
  \item \textsuperscript{161} \textit{Id.}
  \item \textsuperscript{162} \textit{Id.} §§ 803, 809.
  \item \textsuperscript{163} \textit{Id.} § 805.
  \item \textsuperscript{164} See \textit{supra} text accompanying notes 118-46.
  \item \textsuperscript{165} Neither the Agreement nor the Bylaws establish any rules for the tenure or
\end{itemize}
convincingly that, absent some external constraint on the appointer, at-will appointees will closely reflect the political preferences of their appointer. Obviously, if the position has any value to the appointees, they have an incentive to remain on the Board. Even if that incentive fails to operate, in instances where the appointee deviates too far, she will be replaced with someone more tractable, unless the costs of replacing her exceed the costs of her intransigence.

There is no obvious reason here why states would be reluctant to remove appointees who fail to fully represent the interests of the appointing state officials. Publicity over removal, for instance, seems likely only to increase the appointer’s support among constituents who oppose the appointee’s positions. One possible constraint on removal is that an appointee with long tenure may develop ties to other Board members, or other institution-specific expertise, that would make replacing her somewhat costly. But that would represent a long-term cost, and a fairly difficult one to measure. The appointee’s specific adverse vote (or proposed vote), however, on an issue known to the appointer’s constituency, would represent a clear removal of Board representatives. States, therefore, would seem free to remove their representatives at will. However, it should be said that states could perhaps do much to change the dynamics I discuss here simply by limiting the grounds for removal of their representatives to “for good cause only” or the like.

166 E.g., Stephen Calabresi & Christopher S. Yoo, The Unitary Executive During the First Half-Century, 47 CASE W. RES. L. REV. 1451, 1460-61 (1997); Neal Devins, Political Will and the Unitary Executive: What Makes an Independent Agency Independent?, 15 CARDozo L. REV. 273, 278 (1993); Cynthia Farina, Statutory Interpretation and the Balance of Power in the Administrative State, 89 COLUM. L. REV. 452, 504 & n.226 (1989); Geoffrey P. Miller, Introduction: The Debate over Independent Agencies in Light of Empirical Evidence, 1988 DUKE L.J. 215, 218-22 (summarizing results of studies); see also Morrison v. Olson, 487 U.S. 654, 687-92 (1988) (assuming that power to remove implies power to control executive officers); Humphrey’s Executor v. United States, 295 U.S. 602, 629 (1935) (“[I]t is quite evident that one who holds his office only during the pleasure of another, cannot be depended upon to maintain an attitude of independence against the latter’s will.”). The Board is also dependent on states for funding and staffing, so that even rather independent-minded Board members may be somewhat constrained by their need for continuing logistical support in carrying out their perceived mission. Cf. WEldON V. BARTON, INTERSTATE COMPACTS IN THE POLITICAL PROCESS 169 (1963) (arguing that commissions without independent revenue-raising authority are obliged, as result of their financial dependency on states, to be “responsive to the states rather than to any regional constituency”).

and immediate political cost to the appointer. The appointee's replacement cost is unlikely to prevent her removal over any publicized policy issue, and she will probably be aware of that calculus.

The possibility of logrolling will likely make this state influence a significant factor in Board outcomes. Obviously, a single state cannot by itself vote down a sanction aimed at its deviant tax scheme; indeed, states must abstain from sanction votes against themselves. The state can, however, logroll; it can trade its vote on other matters in exchange for votes against sanction. In a body of diverse interests, especially one with a high vote threshold, logrolling is inevitable. That is not to say logrolling is bad. Often, it is utility maximizing in that it permits voters for whom a particular outcome is utility-positive to attract votes from those for whom it is either a matter of indifference or a smaller utility-negative. The peril to the public may come if there are significant agency costs or other market breakdowns, as where representatives are indifferent to an outcome because they fail to fully internalize the costs of the outcome to their constituents. In that case, the indifferent voter trades off her vote for too little, so that the end result is a net negative utility outcome for the public.

As a result, the Board probably will perpetuate the problem that state tax decision-makers do not internalize the costs of disuniformity.

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168 On the significance of long-term versus short-term costs, see sources cited supra note 115.

169 The appointee's awareness, of course, is significant because a large part of the removal power is its "chilling effect on insubordinate employees." Calabresi & Yoo, supra note 166, at 1461.

170 SSUTA, supra note 14, § 809.


172 See James M. Buchanan & Gordon Tullock, THE CALCULUS OF CONSENT: LOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF CONSTITUTIONAL DEMOCRACY, chs. 10-13 (1962); Lynn A. Baker, Direct Democracy and Discrimination: A Public Choice Perspective, 67 CHI.-KENT L. REV. 707, 727-28 (1991); cf. Hildreth et al., supra note 46, at 840 (noting that logrolling could permit state cooperation on tax policy in some cases in which many states are indifferent or would actually suffer some harms from such policy).


174 In addition, representatives may exchange votes for mutually inefficient legislation that offers some political or other reward to the representative, so that the logrolling degrades public welfare. See Aranson et al., supra note 115, at 44-45.
Board members represent the political constituency of their appointers. As we have seen, these voters, in turn, do not fully internalize the benefits of a uniform set of national rules because the gains of that benefit are distributed nationally. Thus, it is probable the Board will often be willing to trade a more uniform rule for one permitting deviations, resulting in disproportionate benefits for one group of Board voters.

Second, to the extent that there are parties who do suffer the full pains of disuniformity, the Board also seems to fulfill Shaviro’s prediction that there will be no stable coalition in favor of reform. As we saw in the pre-SSUTA scenario, businesses who sell taxable products in multiple jurisdictions might plausibly form a potent lobbying bloc. However, their influence there was limited by their need to monitor and lobby thousands of taxing jurisdictions. Under the SSUTA, their situation is somewhat improved. While the businesses still must monitor developments in every taxing jurisdiction, they probably only need to lobby the fifty states that appoint Board members. Further, the SSUTA gives the business community a quasi-formal role in decision-making, through the medium of a Business Advisory Council, whose precise operation is at present unclear. On the other hand, the business community will be repeatedly fractured between businesses whose interests are solely in tax-law uniformity, and those who have the opportunity to benefit from a disuniformity, such as one favoring local businesses. Such disuniformity rents may often be highly salient for the business. If so, the pro-uniformity coalition will likely be unstable. While these

175 See supra text accompanying notes 83-84.
176 Cf. Isaacson, supra note 20, ¶ 5 (claiming that even during development of SSUTA states have continued to hold onto “many diverse and unique features of their individual state tax systems”).
177 See Shaviro, supra note 46, at 896-97 (summarizing argument that state and local actors will not, on their own, resolve differences between different local tax systems).
178 See supra text accompanying notes 96-97.
179 See supra text accompanying notes 96-97.
180 SSUTA, supra note 14, § 811.
181 See Isaacson, supra note 20, ¶ 87 (arguing that local “retail giants” are strongest force resisting effort by out-of-state sellers to reduce tax compliance burdens); Swain & Hellerstein, supra note 27, at 612 (describing successful efforts of local business interests to alter some terms of SSUTA in their states); id. at 613 (noting that small and large sellers disagree about rules for exempting some businesses from collection obligations).
182 Cf. Shaviro, supra note 46, at 956-57 (describing high visibility and importance to taxpayers of state tax rules disproportionately favoring them).
factors are somewhat unpredictable, on balance it seems that the influence of business as a force for uniformity will be at best uneven.

In addition, it is unclear that even businesses who would benefit from uniformity and principle will in fact prefer them to the opportunity to extract disuniformity rents for themselves. Consider, for example, the recent litigation over the tax breaks Ohio offered to DaimlerChrysler in order to entice it to build an auto manufacturing plant in the state. The vast majority of state attorneys general filed amicus briefs in the Supreme Court supporting Ohio, notwithstanding the fact that, as an economic matter, the states were probably being forced into a race to slash taxes in order to attract businesses. For the most part, these targeted lower tax revenues hurt businesses because they result in fewer services, a heavier tax burden on the rest of the tax base, or both. Yet the state attorneys general pressed on in favor of targeted tax breaks, because, arguably, significant business constituencies threatened to go elsewhere if they did not. Collective action problems aside, what may have lined up

183 See Hildreth et al., supra note 46, at 850; Shaviro, supra note 46, at 958. In addition, some jurisdictions lack a significant export presence, somewhat diminishing the influence of forces in favor of uniformity.


188 Cf. Kelly Edmiston, Strategic Apportionment of the State Corporate Income Tax, 55 Nat'l Tax J. 239, 239-62 (2002) (concluding that states face prisoner's dilemma in deciding whether to institute tax policy that favors local producers, and that optimal strategy for them will be to adopt such incentives even if revenue-negative).
these businesses in favor of tax breaks was the hope that maintaining a system in which they could obtain their own big breaks would outweigh the costs of giving some breaks to others. ¹⁸⁹

These political effects might be of little moment if the Board were charged with interpreting a highly detailed and fairly rigid set of legal rules, which might leave little play for vote-trading or political influence. Instead, the most pertinent legal provision before the Board in every sanction case will be the remarkably open-textured term, “substantially compliant.”¹⁹⁰ This presents the third problem to the Board’s effectiveness. The uncertainty of the meaning of “substantial” is not simply lexical. There are at least three major theoretical open questions standing behind the concept of substantiality. The most important is the Quill dilemma already described — whether in fact it is better to have perfect uniformity, or whether some diversity actually serves national interests by enabling innovation and a spur to competition.¹⁹¹ Quite probably, the Board should have the power and the policy goal of permitting some differences among states in order to foster valuable experimentation.

Two other substantiality concepts are thorny but not as important to the goals of the project. For one, it is unclear whether an individual state should bear the cost of deviations by others. That is, a single definition in the context of an entire state code is unlikely by itself to be viewed as rendering a state not substantially in compliance. But if every jurisdiction gets “one free deviation,” then we quickly have a patchwork of regulations again. Yet if we view each state’s definition of substantiality in the context of whether the system of rules already has exceptions, then states will have an incentive to be the first to deviate. It is similarly difficult to say how we should treat state choices in enforcement or auditing. If a state’s code nominally complies, but it is clear that the state will not enforce some provisions it disfavors, is the state in compliance? If we say yes, we come very close to dictating how states choose to allocate scarce enforcement funds among competing policy priorities. If we say no, however, substantial compliance may be meaningless.

The point here is not that these problems are insuperable, only that

¹⁸⁹ For example, if the cost of a break to Business A, spread among all state taxpayers, is $1,000, it is entirely rational for Business B to want to maintain the tax-break system, at least for one more round, if B has a better than 1-in-100,000 chance of its own $100 million incentive being next in the queue.

¹⁹⁰ SSUTA, supra note 14, § 805; see Isaacson, supra note 20, ¶ 44 (complaining that “substantially” language allows state regimes to “vary . . . in countless ways”).

¹⁹¹ See supra text accompanying notes 44-46, 75-79.
they are highly debatable. There will actually be a principled argument against uniformity in many cases. Thus, even if there were a strong demand among some portions of the public for principled interpretation by the Board, it would be easy for the Board to evade the issue. The Board could almost always appease individual interest groups, while giving at least lip service to demands for principle by others.

That leads us to the fourth problem. The danger of using principle as a cover for rent-seeking is not serious if we think that the Board will genuinely internalize demands or expectations of principled behavior. As with state-level bureaucrats or state courts, the Board could develop an institutional mission that might lead it to resist rent-seeking. Right now, however, that looks unlikely. The Board is composed of political appointees removable at will, so that there would be little reason for the public to expect them to resist popular pressure. In contrast to Commissioners of the European Union (“E.U.”), for example, who must pledge to represent the interests of the E.U. over those of their home nation, the Board members have no obvious institutional mission. Even if they did, the Board members are not full-time employees. It is doubtful that being a weekend Board member will be as important to the members’ sense of identity and self-worth as their full-time jobs, so that the corresponding importance of fulfilling any role-norms will be diminished. The Board also may not have the budget for full-time staff, and its performance in their absence may be so low as to diminish any public expectations. This would further ratchet down any pressure on the Board to do better.

One may hope that principled, or at least frequent, Board sanctions could influence state-level actors upon whom the SSUTA ultimately depends. But the Board alone may not be capable of delivering such sanctions. Thus, at the risk of invoking a tower of “turtles all the way down”,

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194 In correspondence, Professor Swain points out that Board members are likely to be able to draw on staff resources at their home-state taxation and finance agencies. But that interdependence would likely only exacerbate the danger that the Board members would empathize more closely with their home state and its interests than the nationalist goals of the SSUTA. Cf. Diller, supra note 110, at 1209-10 & n.450 (noting study demonstrating that cooperation between agency and contractors undermined contractors’ independent thinking); Larry Kramer, Understanding Federalism, 47 VAND. L. REV. 1485, 1553-54 (1994) (claiming that collaborating experts tend to follow views of fellow experts over those suggested by outsiders).
down,“ as the physicist Stephen Hawking put it, we should also examine whether there are yet other layers of review that could in turn discipline the Board.195 Two possibilities leap to mind: Congress and the federal courts. I consider these two in turn.

C. What About Congress?

The Governing Board has flaws, but it does not exist in isolation. In thinking about the Board’s performance, we also need to consider the possible influence of other interested parties. For example, Professor John Swain, in his thoughtful article describing the SSUTA, argues that Congress will have a strong influence on Board behavior.196 He claims that fear of further congressional meddling after federal ratification of the SSUTA would ensure that the Board protected the purposes of the legislation.197 With respect, I am dubious.

To begin with what is probably a simplified picture, let us start with what may be Congress’s most powerful oversight tool in the administrative arena: the budgeting process.198 Agencies and other cooperative ventures set up and funded by Congress know that each year their performance will be weighed by a budgeting committee. Poor performance may result in tighter budgets or increased substantive restrictions on their use of funds.199 Greater even than the power of the purse in this process, I would argue, is the power of certainty. The agency knows that it cannot avoid scrutiny, and that it at least must marshal substantial outside forces (as from lobbying from its private sector regulatory partners) to mitigate the scrutiny it will endure.

Certainty is so important in the oversight context because legislative

197 Id.; see also Hildreth et al., supra note 46, at 845 (noting arguments by others that federal authorization would put pressure on Congress to ensure future viability of compact).
199 See Tiefer, supra note 198, at 212-14.
The world is large and Congress is small. Again, this is one of the key insights that drives public choice theory: the cost of enacting legislation is very high. It is difficult to capture Congress's attention long enough to carry out all the various steps leading to legislation, and to overcome the doubts, opposing interests, and presumptions in favor of the status quo. Further, given the difficulty of predicting future results and discerning their political effects, legislators may be reluctant to tie themselves to the continuing success of legislation that is already enacted. At the same time, the rewards of high profile claims of ongoing responsibility are less than the rewards of moving on to new legislation. Voter attention tends to be highest at enactment and rather low afterwards. Thus, the average legislator often concludes that it is better to take credit only for the ribbon cutting, and remain free to assign blame for later failures to someone else's errors. On the other hand, elected officials do have important incentives to undertake low profile involvement in the ongoing administration of government, as I will return to in a moment.

For now, though, the point is that Congress may be unlikely to pay attention to the SSUTA after it is ratified, and the Board will almost certainly suspect as much. Congress provides no funds, and will have no regularly scheduled oversight of the Board's performance. The most pertinent example here is Public Law 86-272, a statute enacted in 1959 to protect out-of-state sellers from some forms of state taxation. See Hammond & Knott, supra note 106, at 121 (claiming that Congress tends not to exercise its ongoing supervisory power). For more general accounts of legislative inertia, see GUIDO CALABRESI, A COMMON LAW FOR THE AGE OF STATUTES 91-119 (1982); William N. Eskridge, Jr., Dynamic Statutory Interpretation, 135 U. PA. L. REV. 1479, 1524-25 (1987). See Thomas W. Merrill & Henry E. Smith, Optimal Standardization in the Law of Property: The Numerus Clausus Principle, 110 YALE L.J. 1, 66 (2000); Martin Redish & Theodore T. Chung, Democratic Theory and the Legislative Process, 68 TUL. L. REV. 803, 850-51 (1994).

See Aranson et al., supra note 115, at 32-33; Morris P. Fiorina, Legislative Choice of Regulatory Forms: Legal Process or Administrative Process?, 39 PUB. CHOICE 33, 55-60 (1982); Macey, supra note 91, at 284-85.

See Aranson et al., supra note 115, at 53-54.

Id. at 57-58.

the “problems” Public Law 86-272 was to address. A thoughtful and interesting report followed, and Congress has done nothing since. Nor will there likely be any sustained constituency for congressional oversight. If we think that Congress, like state-level elected officials, responds to the intensity of constituent demands, it is hard to see how advocates of uniform state rules will prevail. Again, the prediction here is that the most intense and persistent participants in debates about state sales tax rules will be local businesses who might benefit from rules that disproportionately favor them. If anything, then, Congress's involvement would be likely to undermine uniformity, as representatives and senators exert their influence with the Board in a way that is far from public scrutiny but quite well-known and appreciated by the beneficiary. That approach is particularly attractive to legislators because of their incomplete data about public opinion: it is easy for them to get information about how an active interest group feels about their work, but rather difficult to obtain information about how the general public will respond. As a result, the legislator who has an opportunity to appease an interest group in an action beneath the general public’s notice is likely to seize it.

Let us now add yet another layer of complication. Coalitions who approach Congress seeking legislation or other congressional activity can observe, as we just have, the possibility of future inattention, or at least the need to remain cohesive as a lobbying force. They will discount to themselves the value of legislation that comes with these future risks or costs, and therefore will be willing to pay a lower price to obtain it. Accordingly, Congress can extract higher rents by building in stronger assurances of future performance, such as

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207 See Hildreth et al., supra note 46, at 830. Hildreth, Murray, and Sjoquist attribute Congress's inaction to a stalemate between competing interest groups, with none of them able to muster enough support to convince Congress to pass any more detailed solution. Id.
208 Cf. Shaviro, supra note 46, at 953 (noting that public choice theory predicts that Congress may be reluctant to intervene to prevent single state from using its tax system to impose costs on others).
209 Aranson et al., supra note 115, at 38-39.
210 Cf. Macey, supra note 91, at 276, 283-86 (describing how regulators extract rents from interest groups in exchange for forbearing from preempting state regulation).
opportunities for third parties themselves to alert Congress, policing
the terms of the deal they have struck, supra note 211, or structural limitations on
an agency’s ability to change direction, supra note 213. At present, though, the
current design of the SSUTA and its enabling legislation does not
include any of these features. At most, Congress might receive various
signals from dissenting opinions in Board sanction determinations, for
deference, or from Business Advisory Council statements. Without
devoting close to its full attention, however, Congress cannot be
certain whether these signals are genuine or self-serving. As a
result, Congress’s most effective tools for supervising those who
receive its delegations, such as regular budget review, straitjacket
agency procedures, and third party oversight, all seem to be lacking in
its relationship with the SSUTA Governing Board.

These generalizations may not be fair to all congresspersons. Some
legislators will have a principled attachment to uniform tax rules, or
will have ideological or institutional commitments to state political
parties or state government that may cause them to prize the long-
term revenue interests of states over their own short-term political
rewards. This situation, though, also ends up cutting against
uniformity. To the extent that federal legislators make efforts to
please their state counterparts, or are very receptive to their entreaties,
Congress’s power will be diluted as an independent check on the state
tendency of disuniformity. The pool of effective overseers must be

212 See Levmore, supra note 211, at 572-76, 586-91; Arthur Lupia & Matthew
McCubbins, Learning from Oversight: Fire Alarms and Police Patrols Reconstructed, 10

213 See Horn & Shepsle, supra note 106, at 499; Macey, supra note 106, at 700;
McCubbins et al., Administrative Procedures, supra note 106, at 246.

214 See Lupia & McCubbins, supra note 212, at 104-05.

215 One sponsor of the SSUTA legislation, for example, was formerly a state
revenue official. See Internet Tax Moratorium and Equity Act, S. 512, 107th Cong.
(2001) (identifying Sen. Byron Dorgan as one of bill’s sponsors); Biographical
Directory of the United States Congress, Byron Leslie Dorgan,
http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=D000432 (last visited Mar. 7,
2007) (noting that Sen. Dorgan was Tax Commissioner of North Dakota from 1969 to
1980). For descriptions of how government officials’ personal and professional values
may shape their response to interest group pressure, see supra text accompanying
notes 118-20. For descriptions of how loyalty to a political party or other ideological
group may trump lobbying, see Michael A. Fitts, The Vices of Virtue: A Political Party
Perspective on Civic Virtue Reforms of the Legislative Process, 136 U. PA. L. REV. 1567,
1604 (1988); Larry D. Kramer, Putting the Politics Back into the Political Safeguards of
Helpman, Party Discipline and Pork-Barrel Politics (Nat’l Bureau of Econ. Research,
drawn from those congresspersons who are truly committed to state fiscal stability, rather than those content with being on good terms with state officials. I submit this will be a very small pool, a fact that will become quickly evident to the Board.

In short, much the same forces that produced disuniformity in the first place, and that will likely entrench it in the Governing Board, are also likely to disable significant congressional oversight of the Board. And that will be apparent to the Board itself.

D. Judicial Review?

Professor Swain also suggests that judicial review might improve uniformity under the Agreement.216 Although he does not have much opportunity to elaborate on his reasoning in his brief essay, Congress might provide for Board determinations to be reviewed in federal court, as it has in several versions of the SSUTA bill.217 Doing so might either prompt the Board to give greater heed to national interests, or failing that, provide for occasional overruling of egregious Board decisions. There are potential difficulties on that front, as well, although judicial review likely has a role to play in any successful redesign of the SSUTA.

Legal scholars dispute what effects judicial review will have on the deliberations of the entity under review. At the risk of oversimplifying, the main dispute seems to be whether reviewed entities or “agencies”218 care that they will be overturned by the court. Some scholars claim that judicial review simply creates a sort of “overhang,” where the agency will deliberately avoid considering the grounds that the court will consider.219 That frees the agency to more completely fulfill constituent demands. When a court then reverses, the agency simply turns to the constituents, shrugs, and says, “We did all we could for you.” Indeed, in this scenario, the agency arguably benefits from reversal because it can extract rents a second time around for its next attempt. Shaviro agrees with this account, at least on the question of state tax uniformity. He is skeptical that the Supreme Court can intervene usefully, especially to the extent that its

216 Swain, supra note 196, at 382; see also Isaacson, supra note 20, ¶ 99.
218 To be less cumbersome, I will refer generally to these entities as agencies, with the understanding that sometimes they are something else.
219 Mark Tushnet is a leader on this side. See Mark Tushnet, Taking the Constitution Away from the Courts 57-65 (2001).
Interventions might deter Congress from acting itself.\footnote{Shaviro, supra note 46, at 975, 988-90.}

Other writers, including this one, argue instead that constituents and ideologically committed agency personnel want results, not excuses, and that they have limited patience for government demands for rents.\footnote{See Galle, supra note 122, at 194-95; cf. Philip P. Frickey, The Avoidance Canon, Legal Process Theory, and Narrowing Statutory Interpretations in the Early Warren Court, 93 CAL. L. REV. 397, 462-63 (2005) (describing how some tactics of judicial review might play off of agency determination to reach particular outcome).} It follows that agencies, therefore, will be forced to balance the most perfect constituent outcome against the possibility of reversal.\footnote{Cf. Jim Rossi, Political Bargaining and Judicial Intervention in Constitutional and Antitrust Federalism, 83 WASH. U. L.Q. 521, 525, 537-38 (2005) (arguing that effect of judicial review on state legislative decisions affecting commerce is to force legislators to internalize costs of effects on other jurisdictions by depriving legislators of reward of successfully regulating).} The agency might then select a second best solution that is mindful both of constituents and the court. And, crucially, judicial review need not be all or nothing. Judges have a variety of tools available that allow them, in essence, to require political actors to take a more careful look at the challenged outcomes, often with guidance from the court about which factors deserve more attention or respect.\footnote{For a comprehensive summary of these tools, see Dan T. Coenen, A Constitution of Collaboration: Protecting Fundamental Values with Second-Look Rules of Interbranch Dialogue, 42 WM. & MARY L. REV. 1575, 1587 (2001).} In this way, courts can improve the deliberative quality of political decisions.\footnote{See Galle, supra note 5, at 205. A problem for this theory, as with the similar internalization story related by Rossi, supra note 222, is that regulators may discount the effects of future invalidation. If a regulator believes that judicial review will occur in the distant future, she may assume she will be out of office, or in a new position no longer tied to the success of the reviewed regulation, by the time of review. Or she may be happy with the opportunity at least to have her optimal outcome for the time between its enactment and its review. This is one reason I have suggested elsewhere that the ideal design of a system of judicial review might push it back in time to be more tightly integrated with the regulatory process itself. See Galle, supra note 122, at 187.}

There is another way in which I would argue that judicial review can improve the Board’s deliberations. As I described earlier, arguably a large part of what affects the principled character of bureaucratic outcomes is institutional mission and public expectations.\footnote{Supra text accompanying notes 117-20, 129.} A bureaucracy subject to judicial review may come to see itself not simply as a purely political machine, but instead part of the instrumentation of justice. Judicial review, in other words, may
encourage bureaucrats to internalize the rules laid down by the court, or at least see themselves as part of the rule of law, which may limit political pressures to favor localities.

My concern, therefore, is not with the institution of judicial review, but rather with its particular design. Direct review of Board decisions in lower federal courts implicates all of the structural weaknesses of the federal judiciary. As the Supreme Court itself has already stated repeatedly, federal courts are not well-positioned to determine the appropriate balance between state political tax autonomy, the benefits of diversity, and the need for national uniformity. That inability is precisely why the Quill Court punted the problem of tax jurisdiction back to Congress. Courts cannot easily measure or track how diverse states have become, how burdensome those differences are, whether differences produce fruitful experiments or races to the bottom, and so on. Yet determining whether a state is in substantial compliance, as we have seen, requires just these judgments. Furthermore, guesswork by different federal district or circuit courts may result in the very patchwork the Agreement hopes to prevent.

These problems are exacerbated by the fact that any act authorizing judicial review of Board decisions would likely have to authorize review at the behest of affected private individuals. My hypothesis is that state officials are unlikely to vigorously challenge discriminatory provisions by other states, largely in order to facilitate logrolling. That logic seemingly extends to state court challenges to Board decisions. Thus, in order to police disuniformity, we would have to permit the private interests disadvantaged by a particular provision, or by disuniformity generally, to bring their own challenges in court.

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227 See Quill, 504 U.S. at 318 (“This aspect of our decision is made easier by the fact that the underlying issue is . . . one that Congress may be better qualified to resolve . . . .”); McClure & Hellerstein, supra note 48, ¶ 6.


229 See supra text accompanying notes 189-92.


231 See supra text accompanying notes 165-94.
The difficulty there, as described elsewhere, is that private enforcement efforts often further complicate courts’ policymaking efforts. For example, the threat of a private suit will tend to make it harder for any central authority — such as the Board, in this case — to strike a negotiated solution with the alleged offender. An action initiated by private suit may deprive the court of the experience of the agency that ordinarily brings enforcement actions. And resolution of the private suit may not be as open to the potentially many competing public voices that would otherwise be reflected in a government decision to proceed with an enforcement action.

Finally, there is an argument that, in providing a basis for judicial review, any authorizing act would violate the non-delegation doctrine. The argument would posit that federal ratification of the SSUTA would in effect delegate the authority to shape the future content of federal law to an entity remote from federal political controls. The non-delegation doctrine, although now largely unused, is thought to prohibit Congress from assigning its law making power to any other entity. While delegations to federal agencies and to states are now relatively unrestrained, delegations to private actors may be more problematic. The Supreme Court, it appears, is

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232 See Galle, supra note 8, at 216-25.
234 See Galle, supra note 8, at 217.
235 See Peter H. Schuck, Suing Government: Citizen Remedies for Official Wrongs 156-61 (1983); Fuller, supra note 228, at 394-404.
239 See Whitman v. Am. Trucking Ass’n, 531 U.S. 457, 472 (2001) (upholding broad delegation of authority to federal agency); United States v. Sharpnack, 355 U.S. 286, 294 (1958) (upholding federal law punishing as criminal any act committed in federal enclave which would be criminal if committed in state in which enclave is located); Prudential Ins. Co. v. Benjamin, 328 U.S. 408, 434-36 (1946) (recognizing Congress’s power to authorize states to exercise its own power to regulate insurance); Carter v. Carter Coal Co., 298 U.S. 238, 311-12 (1936) (suggesting that some delegations to private parties would be unconstitutional); FM Props. Operating Co. v.
anxious about its own ability either to fill in broad swaths of policy content left open by Congress, or uncertain of its ability to gauge the openness and democratic character of delegations to private actors. The Board’s processes would plausibly implicate both of those problems. Future interpretations of the SSUTA under the present plan are to be crafted, not by Congress, and not directly by states, but by a private entity — the Board — which is incorporated under the laws of Indiana. It is unclear that the democratic representativeness and transparency rationales that permit delegation to purely state entities would reach the Board. The question, then, is whether the Board is more like a private entity or a state under these criteria. I think that would be a difficult question.

These concerns about judicial review all have a common thread, and I believe a common solution. Each reflects the courts’ inability to

City of Austin, 22 S.W.3d 868, 873-77 (Tex. 2000) (rejecting, under Texas constitutional principles similar to federal non-delegation doctrine, delegation of policy-making authority to private entity).

For example, in *Carter v. Carter Coal Co.*, the Court suggested that delegation to large coal producers of power to regulate the coal industry might be unconstitutional, highlighting the difference between “presumptively disinterested” official bodies and “private persons whose interests may be and often are adverse to the interests of others in the same business.” 298 U.S. at 311-12. Later courts considering delegations to state authorities distinguished *Carter Coal* on the ground that state officials are politically accountable to their constituencies. E.g., *Lac Courte Oreilles Band of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians v. United States*, 367 F.3d 650, 659-60 (7th Cir. 2004); see also *FM Props.*, 22 S.W.3d at 873-74; Rosenkranz, supra note 239, at 2133.

Professor Vikram Amar, on the other, reads the state-delegation cases to suggest an alternative theory of non-delegation under which the key criterion is not the public accountability of the delegatee, but rather the ease with which Congress could reclaim or amend its delegation. Vikram Amar, *Indirect Effects of Direct Election: A Structural Examination of the Seventeenth Amendment*, 49 VAND. L. REV. 1347, 1360-84 (1996). Under this view, delegations to private actors should be unproblematic.

SSUTA Bylaws, supra note 130, art. II, § 1. This possibility for future amendments is a key difference, I believe, between the SSUTA and many other compacts. When Congress ratifies a compact it has before it all of the provisions that will become law, so that there is no reasonable argument that Congress did not itself contemplate the compact’s effects on federal law. But later amendments to the compact, such as will be routine under the SSUTA, raise the possibility that the amendments will introduce policy choices Congress never weighed or perhaps even anticipated. See *Gibbons v. Ogden*, 22 U.S. (9 Wheat.) 1, 207-09 (1824). While that possibility is acceptable in the case of delegations to trustworthy partners, that may not be true of delegations to others. See *Yakus v. United States*, 321 U.S. 414, 424 (1944).

*Cf. FM Props.*, 22 S.W.3d at 874-75 (setting out eight factors court considers in determining whether delegation to private entity contravenes purposes of non-delegation doctrine).
function expertly as representatives of national interests. The courts' connection to popular preferences is attenuated, and is updated only intermittently through their encounters with individual litigants. Similarly, the demands of balancing different federalism interests stretches the courts' technical expertise and fact-finding ability beyond their current institutional limits. There are many courts, and the prospect of a unifying Supreme Court opinion would be both unlikely and infrequent. These are the exact considerations that usually lead federal courts to rely on and defer to the judgments of federal agencies.243 In the next Part, I suggest how we can get one such agency involved in the decision-making process.

V. A POSSIBLE SOLUTION

In sum, there is a decent probability that the SSUTA as currently designed will not work. Yes, it will permit states to tax out-of-state sellers. And many of its labor-saving goals, such as computerized and uniform tax reporting and collection, are fine accomplishments and will function nicely. However, the grandest policy goal of the Agreement — its ambition to resolve deep tensions between experimentalism and nationwide uniformity — may not operate quite as well. I suspect there are many possible fixes for the problems I have described. I detail one of them below.

To review, there are several challenges. First and foremost, in-state businesses do not fully internalize the costs of national uniformity.244 Many unfortunate consequences flow from that market failure, including the likelihood that the Governing Board set up by the Agreement will not have much interest in constraining non-compliance. Judicial review might, in theory, either improve Board performance, correct its errors, or both. Direct judicial review of Board decisions, however, appears unlikely to produce better results, and might even be constitutionally problematic.

The first goal under my proposal, therefore, is to make in-state businesses take more account of the SSUTA's uniformity goals. The most direct way to do that is to impose a financial penalty for businesses in non-compliant states. States must already submit an annual assessment of their own compliance.245 I suggest that the

243 E.g., Barnhart v. Walton, 535 U.S. 212, 222 (2002); 1 PIERCE, supra note 110, § 2.6.
244 See supra text accompanying notes 83-84, 116, 123, 163-89.
245 SSUTA, supra note 14, §§ 803, 809.
federal deductibility of corporate state and local taxes should be contingent on a federal finding that the state collecting the taxes in fact is substantially compliant. The federal arbiter could impose intermediate sanctions, such as ninety-five percent deductibility for all state business taxpayers. The arbiter function could be filled either by the Internal Revenue Service or by an agency with built-in expertise in consumer goods, such as the Commerce Department. States and other affected parties could appeal an adverse determination to the Federal Circuit. Certification and sanctions would be binding on the IRS and taxpayers, and could not be relitigated in a refund suit or in Tax Court.

This structure is very similar to many other conditional federal subsidies. Consider, for example, Medicaid. It provides compensation to states to defray the costs of care for the indigent in exchange for meeting a long list of federal conditions, including approval of the state’s plan for care by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. The most significant difference here is that the “subsidy” for tax uniformity is in the form of a tax deduction for state taxpayers, rather than a direct cash grant to the state government.

Why use the tax system to motivate compliance? The key advantage here is that using the deduction helps to remove any discounting or fiscal illusion that might minimize the impact of subsidies on corporate incentives. In other words, federal block grant dollars can always be diluted, wasted in administrative costs, or given over to someone else, so that the rational business manager may discount their proportional value. Further, a less-than-fully rational manager

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247 In general, taxpayers can obtain review of adverse IRS determinations in one of two ways. See Boris I. Bittker et al., Federal Taxation of Individuals 51-2 (3d ed. 2002). First, the taxpayer can file an appeal in the Tax Court, a federal trial court dedicated solely to hearing tax appeals. Id. at 51-10 to -14. The primary advantage of Tax Court adjudication is that the taxpayer need not pay before filing his or her appeal. Id. at 51-3. Alternatively, the taxpayer can first pay any disputed tax amount, and then file a claim for refund in an appropriately venued federal district court, or in the Federal Court of Claims. Id. at 51-42 to -44. Tax Court appeals lie with the court of appeals that has jurisdiction over the district in which the taxpayer resides. Id. at 51-40.


may fail to perceive the full value of a grant, just as where the manager does not properly calculate the value of federally subsidized health insurance to her business. 250 The deduction, in contrast, hits the corporation right at its bottom line, with little or no discounting. 251 That makes any penalty more efficient, since the feds need not inflict additional (sometimes unnoticed) fiscal pain in order to achieve the desired level of incentive. 252 In addition, by a doctrinal quirk, placing conditions on tax benefits escapes a major set of limitations on conditional expenditures, including a cumbersome requirement that all federal obligations be spelled out clearly on the face of the statute. 253 There are presently no comparable limits on conditional tax benefits.

Replacing the Board with a federal agency in the compliance certification process also alleviates many of the concerns presented about the efficacy of judicial review. The agency will give the reviewing court a much more reliable interpretive partner — one with a national constituency, predictable and ample staff, developed expertise, little obvious self-interest in any particular outcome, and perhaps an institutional mission to regulate commerce in the national interest. Agency approval, under federal Administrative Procedure Act procedures, will also offer an opportunity for formal public participation in the outcome by all affected stakeholders in a relatively transparent forum. 254 That is not to say that the federal agency will be immune to lobbying by the same constituencies that affect the Board. Far from it; that is why we still would want judicial review. But, for the same reasons that we are less concerned about delegation to federal agencies than to private entities, 255 courts could have much greater assurance that the policy conclusions reached by the agency


251 Or, in any event, no discounts beyond whatever agency costs may result from the separation of management and capital, which would be present in any decision affecting the business.

252 See David A. Dana, Rethinking the Puzzle of Escalating Penalties for Repeat Offenders, 110 Yale L.J. 733, 759-70 (2001).

253 See Galle, supra note 5, at 160-66.


255 One reason we are less concerned about delegation in the agency context is that agencies provide greater assurances of transparency and democratic accountability, and their deliberations are subject to review. See Eric A. Posner & Adrian Vermeule, Interring the Nondelegation Doctrine, 69 U. Chi. L. Rev. 1721, 1743-54 (2002).
are reliable and reflect national norms over local preferences. The court’s ability to rely on its agency partner, in turn, largely mitigates any danger that the court would have to draw on its own limited capacity to determine the right policy outcome.\textsuperscript{256} Further, centralizing review in a single court (and one already with a fair amount of tax experience) allows that court to develop its own expertise, and eliminates any problem with circuit splits.

I do not claim that this proposal would eliminate all disuniformity. That is not its goal. As I mentioned at the outset, I believe the best approach to state taxation is a mix of experimentation and certainty. Under my alternative, the Board is still free to issue new interpretations or amend old ones. The reviewing agency is free to permit some experimentation, under the large umbrella of substantial compliance. Thus, even if the reviewing agency found that a state’s unique approach was noncompliant, it might permit it for a period in order to develop data about whether the alternative approach was better policy. The Board could then utilize that data to revise existing standards. I expect that the Board and the agency would coordinate to share views about whether a given deviation should be viewed as an encouraged experiment or local rent-seeking.

It is hard to predict the political viability of my proposal, but I think it not significantly less plausible than the existing SSUTA structure. Like most pre-commitment strategies, it requires at least a momentary coalition of the public-minded.\textsuperscript{257} Whether or not we think states will support my version depends, I suppose, on whether we think states genuinely want uniformity, or are presently only pretending to want it in order to get jurisdiction to tax out-of-state sellers. Businesses should prefer my plan, despite what looks like a potential for draconian penalties. That assumes that they are genuinely burdened by disuniformity, and are not simply adopting that argument as a basis for resisting sales tax collection duties. If nothing else, debate about this proposal should give us more information about where the different sides really stand.

\textsuperscript{256} See Dorf & Sabel, supra note 11, at 363; Mashaw, supra note 106, at 164-80.

\textsuperscript{257} See Bruce Ackerman, We the People: Foundations 240, 262, 272-74 (1991) (arguing that enacting rules cabining short-term self-interest requires special spirit of public-minded debate); cf. Swain & Hellerstein, supra note 27, at 613 (noting that success of SSUTA project is dependent on “individual sacrifice to the greater good”). See generally Jon Elster, Ulysses and the Sirens (1979) (discussing notion of precommitment strategies and their role in politics, among other areas of human endeavor).
CONCLUSION

Several general points emerge from this case study. The foremost, I think, is that federalism is not self-implementing. Our first efforts at implementing state sales tax autonomy were something of a disaster. Unmediated competition and experiment among jurisdictions, reigned in only by severe and economically distorting penalties imposed by the Supreme Court when the experiment threatened the existence of an open market, produced a fairly unhappy outcome. Everyone from the Court, to states, to businesses recognizes that the present regime is fairly untenable.258

Unfortunately, we have been slow to broaden the scope of this recognition. Despite its evident failures, we are in essence still using the state sales tax model as the purported solution to a variety of other national policy problems. That is, we permit largely unmediated competition among state and local actors. The only regular intervention is that of a relatively rigid, judge-made rule that freezes the competition in place or draws a bright line beyond which it cannot cross. Consider the example of law enforcement. Localities may compete to see which can be toughest on crime, pushing the envelope of crime-fighting tactics until they are occasionally stung back by the extreme sanction of suppressing evidence or reversing a conviction or sentence.259

This Article’s project, therefore, supports the view that experimentation and competition are best served by a refereed federalism.260 As I have shown, to make the most of our federal system, we need to develop the institutional expertise to evaluate parallel programs, and the institutional will to implement best practices that may run contrary to purely local interests. Achieving those goals will often mean that the market, or the market as intermittently regulated by a fairly limited federal court system, must

258 See sources cited supra note 13, 48.
be supplemented by other actors working in coordination with courts, with one another, and with private stakeholders.

Thus, designing a system that can accomplish both tasks at once may require some ingenuity. One particular design lesson the SSUTA experience shows us is the importance of identifying key stakeholders’ incentives. Once we saw that it was primarily local businesses who were driving state tax disuniformity, our design task became relatively simple: find a way to align the incentives of those businesses with our more general object of balancing local experiments with easy nationwide tax compliance.

These insights could lead to an immediate payoff in a related corner of the law of state and local taxation. As discussed briefly above, the states face destructive competition for mobile capital. Recently, a set of plaintiffs trying to challenge Ohio’s decision to give out more than $100 million in tax incentives reached the Supreme Court, only to be thrown out on standing grounds. Commentators have urged the Court to follow the sales tax model in regulating what has become a dysfunctional market; they argue that the Court should hold that all such sales tax incentives are unconstitutional under the Commerce Clause. Congress, in turn, was preparing to do the opposite; in the event the Supreme Court decided in favor of the plaintiffs, Congress contemplated a bill that would have given broad authorization to the States to give whatever investment incentives they desired to attract businesses.

I believe my study here shows that both these models are seriously flawed. They are vulnerable either to excessive influence from self-serving interests, or too inexpert and inflexible to respond nimbly to

\[\text{See supra text accompanying notes 183-89.}\]

\[\text{DaimlerChrysler Corp. v. Cuno, 126 S. Ct. 1854 (2006).}\]


\[\text{See Economic Development Act of 2005, S. 1066 § 2, 109th Cong. (2005) ("Congress hereby exercises its power under Article I, Section 8, Clause 3 of the United States Constitution to regulate commerce among the several States by authorizing any State to provide to any person for economic development purposes tax incentives that otherwise would be the cause or source of discrimination against interstate commerce under the Commerce Clause of the United States Constitution, except as otherwise provided by law."); Economic Development Act of 2005, H.R. 2471, 109th Cong. (2005) (same).}\]
those interests. As I suggested for the SSUTA, one way to counteract both difficulties at once would be to contemplate an institution in which stakeholder input is channeled and shaped by more detached deliberation, and the deliberation is informed by expert regulators. In that way, we would capture the healthy impulse of state competition while constraining the prisoner's dilemma dynamic that sometimes results.

Finally, our effort to determine how best to target stakeholder incentives leads us to one other significant lesson. Our model for coordinated interstate agreements has usually relied on conditional federal spending. Whether it was health care for the indigent, education of children with disabilities, or minimum drinking ages, we have used the offer of federal dollars as a carrot to entice state compliance (where outright federal mandates were thought undesirable or beyond Congress' power). But tax subsidies can be carrots, too. The SSUTA example shows us an instance where conditioning tax benefits in the same way we have conditioned direct spending in the past can be a more efficient way of affecting the behavior of local or private actors. Federalism, for all its benefits, gives us plenty of headaches in coordinating our many competing sub-national interests. We should be open to any solution, even one as strange as conditional business deductions.


266 Thus, this work extends the argument I began elsewhere, that conditional tax benefits may be a useful, if presently overlooked, policy tool. See Brian Galle, A Republic of the Mind: Fiscal Federalism, Cognitive Biases, and Section 164 of the Tax Code, 82 IND. L.J. (forthcoming 2007). There are other fairly preliminary efforts in this direction, as well. See generally Nancy Staudt, Redundant Tax and Spending Programs, 100 NW. U. L. REV. 1197 (2006); David Weisbach & Jacob Nussim, The Integration of Taxing and Spending Programs, 113 YALE L.J. 955 (2004).