Will the Real Legislature Please Stand Up - A Response to Kulch v. Structural Fibers, Inc.: Clarifying the Public Policy Exception

Margaret M. Koesel
Porter, Wright, Morris & Arthur in Cleveland, Ohio

David A. Bell
Porter, Wright, Morris & Arthur in Cleveland, Ohio

Tracey L. Turnbull
Porter, Wright, Morris & Arthur in Cleveland, Ohio

Follow this and additional works at: https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clevstlrev

🔗 Part of the Labor and Employment Law Commons, and the Litigation Commons

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Recommended Citation
Margaret M. Koesel, David A. Bell, and Tracey L. Turnbull, Will the Real Legislature Please Stand Up - A Response to Kulch v. Structural Fibers, Inc.: Clarifying the Public Policy Exception, 46 Clev. St. L. Rev. 19 (1998) available at https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/clevstlrev/vol46/iss1/4

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Law Journals at EngagedScholarship@CSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Cleveland State Law Review by an authorized editor of EngagedScholarship@CSU. For more information, please contact library.es@csuohio.edu.
WILL THE REAL LEGISLATURE PLEASE STAND UP?
A RESPONSE TO "KULCH v. STRUCTURAL FIBERS, INC.: CLARIFYING THE PUBLIC POLICY EXCEPTION."

MARGARET M. KOESEL¹
DAVID A. BELL²
TRACEY L. TURNBULL³

I. INTRODUCTION ......................................................... 20
   A. History of the At-Will Employment Doctrine ... 21
   B. Limiting the Employment-At-Will Doctrine ... 22
      1. Contract Exceptions to the At-Will Doctrine ..... 23
      2. Tort-Based Exceptions to the Employment-At-Will Doctrine ... 26
      3. Legislative Exceptions to the Employment-At-Will Doctrine ... 28

II. THE PUBLIC POLICY EXCEPTION TO THE EMPLOYMENT-AT-WILL DOCTRINE IN OHIO ... 29
   A. GREELEY v. MIAMI VALLEY MAINTENANCE CONTRACTORS, INC. - Ohio's Seminal Case ... 29
   B. GREELEY'S Progeny ........................................... 31
   C. KULCH v. STRUCTURAL FIBERS, INC. ....................... 35

III. A RESPONSE TO KULCH v. STRUCTURAL FIBERS, INC.: CLARIFYING THE PUBLIC POLICY EXCEPTION ............. 37

¹Margaret M. Koesel practices with Porter, Wright, Morris & Arthur in Cleveland, Ohio in the areas of trade secret, employment law, and commercial litigation. She received her J.D. magna cum laude from Cleveland-Marshall College of Law and her B.A. from Baldwin-Wallace College.

²David A. Bell practices with Porter, Wright, Morris & Arthur in Cleveland, Ohio in the areas of employment law and commercial litigation. He received his J.D. magna cum laude from Case Western Reserve University School of Law and his B.A. from Williams College.

³Tracey L. Turnbull practices with Porter, Wright, Morris & Arthur in Cleveland, Ohio in the areas of consumer, products liability, and commercial litigation. She received her J.D. cum laude from Case Western Reserve University School of Law and her B.A. with honors from Hamilton College.
A. Kulch Has Usurped the Legislative Prerogative to Set Public Policy and Will Engender Further Confusion and Unpredictability ........................................ 39
1. Kulch Has Usurped the Legislative Prerogative to Set Ohio Public Policy .................. 39
2. Kulch Has Engendered Further Confusion and Unpredictability in Ohio Employment Law .......................................................... 42
B. Confusion and Unpredictability in Wrongful Discharge Litigation ........................................ 44
IV. Conclusion .................................................. 46

I. INTRODUCTION

In Kulch v. Structural Fibers, Inc., the Supreme Court of Ohio decided a case that promises to have a significant impact on Ohio employment law. There, the court held that an employee who is discharged or disciplined for whistleblowing may bring a common-law cause of action for wrongful discharge based on either the public policy in the Ohio whistleblower statute or the policy set forth in the Occupational Safety and Health Act. The court overruled an earlier decision in which it had held that no common-law cause of action exists in Ohio for whistleblowing.

This Article briefly traces the history of the employment-at-will doctrine from its origins in the English common law through the present. It also examines the exceptions to this doctrine that have arisen during the twentieth century and, in particular, the "public policy" exception. Next, the Article analyzes how Ohio courts have narrowed the at-will doctrine since 1990. The Article then examines the Kulch decision and responds to a recent article that favorably analyzes Kulch. Finally, the Article concludes that this case is improperly decided because it usurps the right of the legislature to establish

---

5Ohio REV. CODE ANN. § 4113.52 (West 1998).
8See infra notes 12-19 and accompanying text.
9See infra notes 26-67 and accompanying text.
10See infra notes 68-95 and accompanying text.
public policy in statutes and because it will lead to further confusion and unpredictability in Ohio employment law.

A. History of the At-Will Employment Doctrine

The employment-at-will doctrine permits an employer to discharge an at-will employee for any reason, or no reason at all, without liability. Essentially, this rule of contract construction creates a rebuttable presumption that, absent a term of duration, an employment relationship may be terminated by either party at will.

In the past two decades, courts and legislatures have taken steps to limit application of the employment-at-will doctrine in the private employment relationship. Recent changes in the at-will employment arena have

12Mark A. Fahlson, The Public Policy Exception to Employment At Will: When Should Courts Defer to the Legislature?, 72 Neb. L. Rev. 956, 956 (1993). While this doctrine is unique to the United States, its origins can be found in the English common law. Under English common law, an employment contract of indefinite duration, absent reasonable cause for discharge, was presumed to extend for one year. Id. at 959 (citing WILLIAM BLACKSTONE, COMMENTARIES ON THE LAWS OF ENGLAND 425 (21st ed. 1847). "[I]f the hiring be general, without any particular time limited, the law construes it to be hiring for a year; upon a principle of natural equity, that the servant shall serve, and the master maintain him, throughout all the revolutions of the respective seasons, as well when there is work to be done as when there is not." Id.

The American doctrine of employment-at-will gained further recognition in Horace Gay Wood's treatise on the law of master and servant. See HORACE G. WOOD, A TREATISE ON THE LAW OF MASTER AND SERVANT (1877). The treatise explained: "with us the rule is inflexible, that a general or indefinite hiring is prima facie a hiring at will, and if the servant seeks to make it out a yearly hiring, the burden is upon him to establish it by proof. ... [I]t is an indefinite hiring and is determinable at the will of either party, and in this respect there is no distinction between domestic and other servants." Id. at 272. (footnote omitted)

However, even under the "traditional formulation" of the at-will employment doctrine, it only applies to "contracts of indefinite duration." BRADD N. SIEGEL & JOHN M. STEPHEN, OHIO EMPLOYMENT PRACTICES LAW 114 (1997). In contrast, "[c]ontracts for a specified term ... are not terminable 'at will' by either party prior to the expiration of the term." Id.


14The erosion of this doctrine is arguably one of the most significant employment law developments in the last quarter of the twentieth century. Henry H. Ferritt, Jr., Beyond Collective Bargaining and Employment At Will: The Future Of Wrongful Dismissal Claims: Where Does Employer Self Interest Lie?, 58 U. Cin. L. Rev. 397 (1989) (advocating drafting of state wrongful dismissal statutes to codify and integrate the law of employee dismissals); Cheryl S. Massingale, At-Will Employment: Going, Going... , 24 U. Rich. L. Rev. 187, 187 (1990) ("[The current system, which has evolved through judicially created exceptions, is expensive, time consuming and does not serve either party well.").
dramatically impacted the predictability and stability of this area of the law and resulted in unnecessary burden and expense for employers.15 These changes have been extensively critiqued.16

The employment-at-will relationship evolved during the late nineteenth century. In the context of the industrial revolution, the at-will relationship was "well suited to employer needs in America's developing industrial and commercial society."17 The underlying premise of the employment-at-will doctrine was the desire to preserve managerial discretion in the workplace and to maintain freedom of contract.18 Proponents of this doctrine argued that it provided incentives for workers to be productive; that is, employees worked harder in order to keep their jobs.19

B. Limiting the Employment-At-Will Doctrine

The employment-at-will doctrine remained intact well into the twentieth century20 and reached its peak in 1915 following the United States Supreme

---


men must be left, without interference, to buy and sell where they please, and to discharge or retain an employee at will for good cause or for no cause, or even for bad cause without thereby being guilty of an unlawful act per se. It is a right which an employee may exercise in the same way, to the same extent, for the same cause or want of cause as the employer.


19Jones, infra note 62, at 1141 (explaining that the employment-at-will doctrine is based on the assumption that employers need complete freedom of contract to conduct business and promote industrial growth).

20See, e.g., Lochner v. New York, 198 U.S. 45, 64 (1905) (holding that courts could not
Court's decision in *Coppage v. Kansas*. The Supreme Court invalidated a statute which prevented employers from discharging or refusing to hire employees because of union membership. The Court explained:

"[S]ince it is self-evident that, unless all things are held in common, some persons must have more property than others, it is from the nature of things impossible to uphold freedom of contract and the right of private property without at the same time recognizing as legitimate those inequalities of fortune that are the necessary result of the exercise of those rights."  

In 1937, in *NLRB v. Jones & Laughlin Steel Corp.*, the Supreme Court first limited the at-will employment rule by upholding the Wagner Act, which prohibited employers from discharging employees for union membership. After *Jones & Laughlin*, courts and legislatures began to carve out exceptions to the at-will employment doctrine. These exceptions have three bases: contract law, tort law, and, most recently, legislative acts.

1. Contract Exceptions to the At-Will Doctrine

Under contract theory, an employee's work by itself, without additional consideration, only entitled him to a wage and supported no promise of job security. Absent a promise by the employee to work for his employer for a fixed period of time, the employee could not infer a promise to retain his services for a fixed period.

Courts have "struggled to find a rationale that would permit them to uphold such promises or representations," such as those found in employee handbooks...
or policy manuals, or oral representations, despite the at-will rule. Some courts characterized such promises as "implied-in-fact contracts," other courts have characterized such representations as "implied-in-law covenants of good faith and fair dealing," and still others analyze such promises under estoppel theories.

Courts consider the implied-in-law covenant of good faith and fair dealing where an employee claims a right to receive the benefits of his employment agreement and, in some states, where an employee has asserted a "bad cause" discharge. Under this theory, courts infer mutual promises between the employer and employee that neither party to the employment agreement will do anything that will impair the right of the other to receive the benefits of the agreement. Some courts and commentators have refused to apply this exception because of its vagueness.

The 'implied-in-fact contract' exception allows an employee to establish an employment contract by proof of "an implied promise of continued employment established by oral representations, a course of dealing, personnel manuals, or memoranda," and the like. Under this exception, an employee

---

28 Siegel & Stephen, supra note 12, at 116.


The distinctions between such theories are difficult to draw and difficult to comprehend and, indeed, the courts themselves frequently appear confused by some of the more arcane theorizing that accompanies this exercise. Ultimately, however, each of these theories focuses on the reasonableness of the employee's expectation that the employer would indeed provide job security or certain benefits.

Id. (footnote omitted)

30 Moberly & Doran, supra note 29, at 371 n.1.

31 Parker, supra note 13, at 361-62; see also Fortune v. Nat'l Cash Register Co., 364 N.E.2d 1251, 1255-56 (Mass. 1977) (finding implied covenant of good faith in contract where employee was at-will).

32 See, e.g., Morrise v. Coleman Co., 738 P.2d 841, 851 (Kan. 1987) (explaining that the duty of good faith and fair dealing is too broad and should not be applicable to at-will contracts); Hinson v. Cameron, 742 P.2d 549, 554 (Okla. 1987) (refusing to impose upon employers a legal duty not to terminate at-will employees in bad faith); see also Robert S. Summers, "Good Faith" in General Contract Law and the Sales Provisions of the Uniform Commercial Code, 54 Va. L. Rev. 195, 262-63 (1968) ("[good faith]" functions to rule out many different forms of bad faith... any general definition of good faith, if not vacuous, is sure to be unduly restrictive, especially if cast in statutory form"); Parker, supra note 13, at 359 (arguing that implied covenant analysis should be abandoned).

33 Moberly & Doran, supra note 29, at 371 n.1; see also Foley v. Interactive Data Corp., 765 P.2d 373, 384 (Cal. 1988) (ordinary rules of contract interpretation permit proof of implied terms; no basis for requiring special consideration); Coelho v. Posi-Sept Int'l, Inc., 544 A.2d 170, 176 (Conn. 1988) (promise of employment security becomes enforceable as soon as employee enters employment; no reliance beyond performance of regular services legally required as consideration); Watson v. Idaho Falls Consol. Hosps., Inc., 720 P.2d 632, 636 (Idaho 1986) (employee handbook creates binding
may allege breach of contract arising from an oral promise or course of conduct.34

Courts have applied this theory where an employee alleges that a promise of employment for a particular period of time should be inferred from the parties’ conduct or written materials.35 For example, personnel materials can contain representations that may bind employers in job security or discharge procedures.36 Courts have declined to employ this exception as it denigrates traditional contract theory by transforming an "at will contract into a just cause contract."37

Some jurisdictions, including Ohio, analyze an employer’s promises or representations under the doctrine of promissory estoppel.38 As the Supreme Court of Ohio explained, holding that promissory estoppel is a separate and independent exception to the at-will rule:

[w]here appropriate, the doctrine of promissory estoppel is applicable and binding to oral employment-at-will agreements when a promise which the employer should reasonably expect to induce action or forbearance on the part of the employee does induce such action or forbearance, if injustice can be avoided only by enforcement of the promise.

The test in such cases is whether the employer should have reasonably expected its representation to be relied upon by its employee and, if so, whether the expected action or forbearance actually resulted and was detrimental to the employee.39

There are conceptual differences between the implied-in-fact contract exception and promissory estoppel.40 For example, unlike an implied-in-fact contract, promissory estoppel does not require that there be a "meeting of the minds" or an agreement, express or implied, between the parties; it is enough that there is "a promise which the employer should reasonably expect to induce

unilateral contract).

34Perritt, supra note 14, at 398.

35Lindenbaum, supra note 16, at 319.

36See Fahlson, supra note 12, at 962.

37Parker, supra note 13, at 355 (explaining that "[e]mployees cannot rely upon the implied covenant as an independent basis of protection in at-will contracts precisely because its invocation calls for a tremendous act of will on the part of a court"); see also Buehner Block Co. v. U.W.C. Assocs., 752 P.2d 892, 895 (Utah 1988) (explaining "a cardinal rule in construing such a contract is to give effect to the intentions of the parties").

38Mers v. Dispatch Printing Co., 483 N.E.2d 150, 155 (Ohio 1985) (recognizing promissory estoppel exception to the at-will employment doctrine).

39Id.

40Siegel & Stephen, supra note 12, at 487.
action or forbearance... The "most important difference may be the nature of relief awarded." As one court explained in a case involving promises in a personnel manual:

Promissory estoppel does not necessarily operate as a substitute for consideration, nor does its application create a binding contract where none existed before. Rather, the doctrine is used to avoid injustice, and the remedy granted for breach may be limited as justice requires. Thus, the trial court need only enforce the manual’s promises as justice requires.  

2. Tort-Based Exceptions to the Employment-At-Will Doctrine

Courts also rely on tort-based theories in formulating exceptions to the employment-at-will doctrine. Tort theories generally offer more expansive remedies than do contract theories. The most prevalent tort-based exception is the public policy exception. The underlying theory supporting this exception is that "basic public policy overrides the freedom of contract embodied in the traditional at will rule." One court explained that this tort seeks to achieve a "proper balance... among the employer’s interest in operating a business efficiently and profitably, the employee’s interest in earning a livelihood, and society’s interest in seeing its public policies carried out." Most states have recognized this tort, although its acceptance is not universal.

---

41 Id. at 487-88.
42 Id. at 489.
45 For a state-by-state survey of wrongful discharge law, see Littler, Mendelson, THE 1997 NATIONAL EMPLOYER 149-213 (1997 ed.).
46 Fahlson, supra note 12, at 963.
48 Gantt v. Sentry Ins., 824 P.2d 680, 687 (Cal. 1992), overruled by Green v. Ralee Eng’g Co., 960 P.2d 1046 (Cal. 1998) "[T]he vast majority of states have recognized that an at-will employee possesses a tort action when he or she is discharged for performing an act that public policy would encourage, or for refusing to do something that public policy would condemn." Id.; see also Greeley v. Miami Valley Maintenance Contractors, 551 N.E.2d 981, 986 n.3 (Ohio 1990) (acknowledging that at least thirty-nine states recognize some form of the public policy exception).
Petermann v. International Brotherhood of Teamsters\(^{50}\) is the seminal case on the public policy exception to the employment-at-will doctrine. There, an employee alleged that his employer had encouraged him to commit perjury before a legislative committee and, when he testified truthfully, the employer discharged him. The California appellate court held that the employee had a right of damages for unlawful termination contrary to the state’s public policy.\(^{51}\) In recognizing a new cause of action, the Petermann court found that the discharge, in effect, coerced an act prohibited by a criminal statute.\(^{52}\)

Courts may find public policies by "identifying a specific provision of a statute, constitution, or administrative regulation, synthesizing a policy from several different statutes or constitutional provisions, identifying a right or mode of conduct covered by traditional common-law cause of actions or identifying a trade practice or well recognized professional standard."\(^{53}\) In the absence of the foregoing provisions, courts have decided "what public policy is from [their] own perception of community values and consideration of competing interests."\(^{54}\)


\(^{51}\)In Petermann, the court explained:

It would be obnoxious to the interests of the state and contrary to public policy and sound morality to allow an employer to discharge any employee, whether the employment be for a designated or unspecified duration, on the ground that the employee declined to commit perjury, an act specifically enjoined by statute.

\(^{52}\)Id. at 27.

\(^{53}\)Perritt, supra note 14, at § 5.10. One state supreme court recently stated:

The right of a court to declare what is or is not in accord with public policy does not extend to specific economic or social problems which are controversial in nature and capable of solution only as a result of a study of various factors and conditions. It is only when a given policy is so obviously for or against the public health, safety, morals or welfare that there is a virtual unanimity of opinion in regard to it, that a court may constitute itself the voice of the community. . . . Tiernan v. Charleston Area Med. Ctr., No. 24434, 1998 W. Va. LEXIS 33, at *5 (W. Va. May 21, 1998) (citing Mamlin v. Genoe, 17 A.2d 407, 409 (W. Va. 1941)).

\(^{54}\)See ARTHUR CORBIN, CORBIN ON CONTRACTS § 1375, at 1165 (1962) ("in determining what public policy requires, there is no limit whatever to the 'sources' to which the court
This exception may enable an employee to bring a cause of action premised upon statutory provisions delineating public policy, although the individual fails to meet the statutory prerequisites. Essentially, courts have applied this theory where an employer adhered to the "letter of the law," but not the "spirit of the law." Although the term "public policy" cannot be precisely defined, courts often consider that the term includes "what is right and just and what affects the citizens of the state collectively."  

The public policy exception has several variants, including (1) refusal to commit an unlawful act, (2) fulfilling a public obligation, and (3) exercising a right or privilege. Cases of the first type include, for example, an employee who alleges that her discharge resulted from her refusal to commit a crime. Cases of the second type include those where an employee seeks to participate in jury duty. Finally, an employee may attribute his discharge to an exercise of a right such as filing a workers' compensation claim.

3. Legislative Exceptions to the Employment-At-Will Doctrine.

Advocates of legislative reform in the area of at-will employment argue that they seek to restore the "balance, predictability and efficiency" to relationships in the employment context. One commentator supporting a legislative solution has remarked that "the public policy tort can become an amorphous source of just cause litigation, unless standards exist for principled decision-making, especially at the summary judgment and pleadings stages." Those who support "just cause" legislation also argue that legislation will level

---

55 Jones, infra note 62, at 1147 (noting that "if an employer's conduct did not constitute a violation of statute because there was a restriction, definition, or exemption contained in the statute, the employee could still recover under a tort wrongful discharge theory"). But see Contreras v. Ferro Corp., 652 N.E.2d 940 (Ohio 1995) (employee must comply with statute to bring public policy claim based on a policy in that statute).

56 Jones, infra note 62, at 1147.

57 See Parker, supra note 13; see also Perritt, supra note 14.


62 Perritt, supra note 14, at 407.
the playing field by establishing boundaries and guidelines for wrongful termination.64

In response to the increased litigation in this area, some states have enacted legislation governing employee discharges.65 In 1987, Montana became the first state to legislatively prohibit wrongful discharge.66 Since then, at least one other state has enacted legislation that alters the traditional at-will employment rule.67

II. THE PUBLIC POLICY EXCEPTION TO THE EMPLOYMENT-AT-WILL DOCTRINE IN OHIO

As recently as 1986, the Supreme Court held the rule in Ohio to be that, absent contractual or statutory restrictions,

the right of an employer to terminate employment at will for any cause, at any time whatever, is not absolute, but limited by principles which protect persons from gross or reckless disregard of their rights and interests, willful, wanton or malicious acts or acts done intentionally, with insult, or in bad faith.68

Accordingly, Ohio employers could discharge employees at any time so long as the discharge was not "contrary to law."69

A. Greeley v. Miami Valley Maintenance Contractors, Inc. - Ohio's Seminal Case

In 1990, in Greeley v. Miami Valley Maintenance Contractors, Inc.,70 the Supreme Court of Ohio followed the majority of state courts and recognized the tort of wrongful discharge in violation of public policy as an exception to the employment-at-will doctrine. Greeley involved an employer who had discharged an employee when it learned that he was subject to a child support withholding order. The discharge violated an Ohio statute, Ohio Revised Code

64Jones, supra note 62, at 1140.

65The National Conference of Commissioners on Uniform State Laws formulated the Model Employment Termination Act in 1991. The Model Act's authors emphasized the need for uniformity and sought to address the situation where a employee is hired in one state, works in another, and is fired in a third. See Perry, supra note 15, at 916.


67See, e.g., ARIZ. REV. STAT. ANN. § 23-1501 (West 1996) (prohibiting terminated employee from claiming wrongful termination unless the employer breached a written contract, asked the employee to violate an Arizona statute, or fired the employee in retaliation for performing a protected act).


69Phung, 491 N.E.2d at 1116; Mers, 483 N.E.2d 150.

70551 N.E.2d 981 (Ohio 1990).
section 3113.213(D), which prohibits an employer from discharging or disciplining an employee based on a court order to withhold personal earnings.\textsuperscript{71} Greeley brought a claim charging that the employer wrongfully discharged him because of the wage assignment order. The court of appeals affirmed the trial court's dismissal.\textsuperscript{72}

The Supreme Court reversed. Although it acknowledged that section 3113.213(D) lacks any remedial provisions, it concluded that "by enacting R.C. 3113.213(D), the General Assembly has set forth a policy which prohibits the use of a child support withholding order as a basis for discharging an employee."\textsuperscript{73} Because "[i]t is our job to enforce, not frustrate, that policy," held the court, "public policy warrants an exception to the employment-at-will doctrine when an employee is discharged or disciplined for a reason which is prohibited by statute."\textsuperscript{74}

The Greeley court emphasized, however, that "it is clear that the employment-at-will doctrine in Ohio is today alive and well in an employment relationship which is, without more, clearly at-will."\textsuperscript{75} Further discussing the scope of its holding, the Greeley court stated:

[The at-will] relationship permits termination of employment for no cause or for "any cause" which is not unlawful, at any time and regardless of motive. Accepting this, henceforth, the right of employers to terminate employment at will for "any cause" no longer includes the discharge of an employee where the discharge is in violation of a statute and thereby contravenes public policy.\textsuperscript{76}

The court, however, left open the possibility of future exceptions:

Today, we only decide the question of a public policy exception to the employment-at-will doctrine based on violation of a specific statute. This is not to say that there may not be other public policy exceptions

\textsuperscript{71}Id. at 983. \textsc{Ohio Rev. Code Ann.} § 3113.213(D) (Banks-Baldwin 1994) provides, in relevant part:

No . . . employer may use a requirement to withhold personal earnings . . . as a basis for a discharge of, or for any disciplinary action against, an employee, or as a basis for a refusal to employ a person. The court may fine an employer who so discharges or takes disciplinary action against an employee, or refuses to employ a person, not more than five hundred dollars.

\textsuperscript{72}Greeley v. Miami Valley Maintenance Contractors, 551 N.E.2d 981 (Ohio 1990).

\textsuperscript{73}Id. at 985.

\textsuperscript{74}Id. at 986. The Greeley court distinguished \textit{Phung}, noting that in \textit{Phung} there was an absence of a "sufficiently clear public policy warranting the creation of a cause of action." \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{75}Id. at 986-87 (internal citations omitted).

\textsuperscript{76}Id. at 987 (internal citations omitted).
to the doctrine but, of course, such exceptions would be required to be
of equally serious import as the violation of a statute.\footnote{Id. (internal citations omitted).}

\textbf{B. Greeley's Progeny}

Only two years later, in \textit{Tulloh v. Goodyear Atomic Corp.},\footnote{68584 N.E.2d 729 (Ohio 1992), overruled by Painter v. Graley, 639 N.E.2d 51 (Ohio 1994).} the Supreme Court of Ohio revisited the public policy tort. In that case, a materials handler claimed that he had been exposed to hazardous dust, chips, and fumes, that his employer failed to warn him about the health hazards associated with his work, and that it concealed critical information about the work environment. The employee brought a common-law tort claim for wrongful discharge, which the trial court dismissed.\footnote{Id. at 732.} The Supreme Court declined to extend the public policy exception to reach a "whistleblower" claim that pre-dated the effective date of Ohio Revised Code section 4113.52, Ohio's Whistleblower Protection Act. The \textit{Tulloh} court held that "absent statutory authority, there is no common-law basis in tort for a wrongful discharge claim."\footnote{Id. at 733.} Thus, the court construed the public policy exception as limited to policies clearly articulated by legislation.


\footnote{In my judgment, public policy clearly demands that a safe workplace be provided, that unsafe working conditions be corrected and that employees who voice concerns aimed at correcting unsafe working conditions are entitled to protection against retaliatory measures." \textit{Id.} at 734.}
In *Provens v. Stark County Board of Mental Retardation & Developmental Disabilities*, the Supreme Court of Ohio declined to create an exception to the at-will employment doctrine where an employee claimed her public employer violated her constitutional rights. The employee alleged that her employer had harassed, discriminated against, and disciplined her in violation of, among other things, the right to free speech granted in the Ohio Constitution.

Declining to extend *Greeley* by creating an exception based on an alleged constitutional violation, the Court reasoned that the public employee had other "reasonably satisfactory" statutory and administrative remedies available. Citing the United States Supreme Court’s decision in *Bush v. Lucas*, the *Provens* court stated:

"It is not incumbent upon this court to engage in the type of comparative analysis of the relative merits of various remedies that is invited by appellant. Rather, the more appropriate course for this court is to defer to the legislative process of weighing conflicting policy considerations and creating certain administrative bodies and processes for providing remedies for public employees such as appellant."

Less than two years later, a fractured court overruled *Tulloh* and expanded the public policy exception. *Painter v. Graley* involved a city’s

---

82Id.
83Id. at 965.

The question whether to augment a remedial scheme carefully constructed by Congress did not turn merely on a determination that existing remedies failed to provide complete relief. Instead, the court asserted that the decision to create a *Bivens*-style remedy in those circumstances turned on a careful evaluation of relevant policy considerations. The court gave special deference to Congress' ability to weigh the policy considerations relevant to a determination of whether to create a remedy for a harm suffered, and, in the end, deferred to Congress' superior expertise, "convinc[ed] that Congress [was] in a better position to decide whether or not the public interest would be served by creating" a *Bivens*-style remedy in the case.

85*Provens*, 594 N.E.2d at 965.
86Justices A. William Sweeney and Resnick concurred in the majority opinion. Chief Justice Moyer concurred in paragraphs one and two of the syllabus and in the judgment. Justice Wright concurred in paragraph one of the syllabus and in the judgment. Justices Douglas and Pfeifer concurred in paragraphs one and three of the syllabus and dissented in part. Judge James A. Brogran of the Second Appellate District, who was sitting for Justice F.E. Sweeney, dissented. Accordingly, there were only four votes to support the paragraph of the syllabus that overruled *Tulloh*.
87The *Painter* court stated that "strict and literal adherence to the syllabus of *Tulloh*
discharge of an unclassified public employee who chose to seek partisan elected office while holding public employment. After carving out a broader exception to the employment-at-will doctrine, the Painter court upheld the discharge, stating:

In specifically designating chief deputy clerks to be unclassified, the legislature expressed the public policy that they serve at the pleasure of those who appointed them. That is, Painter's at-will status as a public employee was prescribed by statute, and is not the result of the common-law employment-at-will doctrine. In that Painter's dismissal did not violate her constitutional rights, the existence of this legislative directive precludes us from finding a "sufficiently clear public policy" against Painter's dismissal based upon her becoming a candidate for office.\(^89\)

Regarding the public policy exception, the Painter court held that it was not limited, as a matter of law, to "public policy expressed by the General Assembly in the form of statutory enactments, but may be also discerned, as a matter of law based on other sources, such as the Constitution of Ohio and the United States, administrative rules and regulations, and the common law."\(^90\) The Painter court did not specify the elements of the public policy tort; rather it indicated:

Full development of the elements of the tort of wrongful discharge in violation of public policy in Ohio [will] result [from] litigation and resolution of future cases, as it is through this means that the common law develops.\(^91\)

\(^88\)639 N.E.2d 51 (Ohio 1994).

\(^89\)Id. at 57. The court noted that its opinion should be limited to public employees. Id. at 57 n.9. It is noteworthy that the Painter court felt compelled to expand the scope of the tort of wrongful discharge in a case that did not implicate the common law doctrine of employment-at-will.

\(^90\)Id. at 52.

Despite expanding the tort beyond statutory enactments, the court stated that "[j]udicial policy preferences may not be used to override valid legislative enactments, for the General Assembly should be the final arbiter of public policy."\(^9^2\)

Although Greeley limited the public policy tort to claims based on policies set forth in statutes, Ohio courts have since broadened the tort to include public policies in the Ohio constitution, federal statutes, and other sources.\(^9^3\) Ohio courts have recognized public policy claims based on such violations as retaliation for filing an OSHA complaint, for making an age discrimination claim, and for serving jury duty.\(^9^4\) One restriction, however, on a claim based on a policy delineated in a statute is that an employee must strictly comply with the statute, or the public policy claim will fail.\(^9^5\)

---

n.8. Professor Perritt's analysis, discussed supra, has not been relied on in any reported decisions outside of Ohio.

92Id. at 57 (quoting State v. Smorgala, 553 N.E.2d 672, 674 (Ohio 1990)).


95Contreras v. Ferro Corp., 652 N.E.2d 940 (Ohio 1995).
C. Kulch v. Structural Fibers, Inc.

In April 1997, the Supreme Court decided Kulch v. Structural Fibers, Inc. Kulch was a factory worker who believed his health problems resulted from exposure to toxic chemicals in the workplace. He orally complained to his employer and then, having received no response, filed a written report with the Occupational Safety and Health Administration ("OSHA"). OSHA inspected the facility and found serious violations that were unrelated to Kulch's allegations. Kulch was discharged. After his discharge, Kulch filed suit, alleging that his employer retaliated against him because he had filed a complaint with OSHA. The complaint included claims under Ohio Revised Code section 4113.52, under the Ohio Whistleblower Protection Act, and for wrongful discharge in violation of public policy.

The trial court granted summary judgment on the whistleblower claim because Kulch had failed to give his employer written notice under the statute. The court also granted summary judgment on the public policy claim, holding that the statute preempted any public policy claim for whistleblowing. The court of appeals affirmed.

On appeal, the Supreme Court of Ohio reversed, in part. Kulch's statutory whistleblower claim under section 4113.52(A)(1) failed as a matter of law because Kulch had not made the required written report prior to contacting the authorities. The court, however, found that section 4113.52(A)(2) does not require an employee to notify his employer of the alleged violation prior to making a report to the authorities. Accordingly, because there was evidence to support application of this subsection, the court reversed summary judgment as to this portion of the statutory claim.

Turning to the public policy claim, the court held that section 4113.52 does not preempt a common-law cause of action for whistleblowing. The court also held that full compliance with the whistleblower statute allows an employee to bring a common-law cause of action for whistleblowing. In reaching this conclusion, the court found it necessary to overrule its earlier holding in Phung that no such exception to the employment-at-will doctrine exists. The court further held, separate and apart from the whistleblower statute, that where an employer discharges or disciplines an employee for filing

---

96 677 N.E.2d 308 (Ohio 1997).
97 Id. at 310.
98 Id.
99 Id. at 311.
100 Id. at 312.
101 Kulch, 677 N.E.2d at 312.
102 In Contreras, the court held that in order to bring a public policy claim based on the whistleblower statute, a plaintiff must strictly comply with the statute. 652 N.E.2d 940, 940-41 (Ohio 1995).
an OSHA complaint, the employee can state a claim for wrongful discharge in violation of public policy.103

In analyzing the public policy claim, the court reiterated the analysis employed in earlier public policy decisions:

In reviewing future cases, Ohio courts may find useful the analysis of Villanova Law Professor H. Perritt, who, based on review of cases throughout the country, has described the elements of the tort as follows:

1. That [a] clear public policy existed and was manifested in a state or federal constitution, statute or administrative regulation, or in the common law (the clarity element).
2. That dismissing employees under circumstances like those involved in the plaintiff's dismissal would jeopardize the public policy (the jeopardy element).
3. The plaintiff's dismissal was motivated by conduct related to the public policy (the causation element).
4. The employer lacked overriding legitimate business justification for the dismissal (the overriding justification element).104

Applying Professor Perritt's analysis, the court concluded that because the clarity and jeopardy elements were met, summary judgment was improperly granted and that, on remand, Kulch would have the opportunity to prove his wrongful discharge claim based on section 4113.52 and OSHA.105

Justice Pfeifer concurred in the syllabus and judgment only.106 Although he agreed that a common law claim exists for whistleblowing, he also cautioned that the "corollary" to this claim is the recognition of "a wide range of reasonable defenses" for employers.107

Justice Cook108 authored a strong dissent that criticized the majority for "elevating itself above the General Assembly as architect of Ohio's public policy."109 The dissenters reasoned that the decision frustrated Ohio public policy by circumventing the remedies in both the Ohio statute and OSHA. They further reasoned that it was illogical to permit a private litigant to bring a public

103 Id. The court also held that the statutory remedies under Ohio Revised Code section 4113.52 and the remedies for a public policy claim are cumulative, but that a plaintiff is not entitled to a double recovery. Id. (paragraphs four and five of the syllabus).
104 Kulch, 677 N.E.2d at 321 (quoting Painter, 639 N.E.2d at 57 n.8 (quoting Perritt, supra note 91, at 398-99)).
105 Id. at 329.
106 Id. at 329-30.
107 Id. at 330.
108 Chief Justice Moyer and Justice Lundberg Stratton joined in the dissent.
109 Kulch, 677 N.E.2d at 330.
policy claim based on a federal statute that itself expressly forbade a private right of action.\textsuperscript{110}

The dissent also noted that in an earlier decision, \textit{Collins v. Rizkana},\textsuperscript{111} the court had stated that where a statute's "coverage provisions form an essential part of its public policy," the court should not "extract a policy from the statute and use it to nullify the statute's own coverage provisions."\textsuperscript{112} The dissenters explained that this was exactly the effect of \textit{Kulch}; namely, that the public policy in favor of workplace safety was being used to defeat the policy considerations that also limited the available relief under the statute.\textsuperscript{113}

The dissent also took issue with the holding that the whistleblower statute does not preempt a common law cause of action for wrongful discharge. According to Justice Cook, where rights and remedies are set forth in the same statute, there is a presumption that the remedies are intended to be exclusive.\textsuperscript{114} She reasoned, further, that the majority improperly "reverses the presumption of exclusivity" when it concludes that because the statute did not contain the words "sole and exclusive," it did not preempt a common law claim.\textsuperscript{115}

Finally, the dissent disagreed with the majority's "eviscerat[ion]" of summary judgment in order to reach the public policy issue and expand the holding of \textit{Greeley}.\textsuperscript{116} The dissent noted that in order to distinguish this case from \textit{Contreras}, the majority had to conclude that plaintiff had preserved its argument for applicability of subsection (A)(2), notwithstanding the apparent abandonment of this argument in the lower courts.\textsuperscript{117}

\section*{III. A RESPONSE TO \textit{KULCH v. STRUCTURAL FIBERS, INC.}: CLARIFYING THE PUBLIC POLICY EXCEPTION}

In a recently published law review article,\textsuperscript{118} author Sandra J. Rosenthal argues that \textit{Kulch} is a positive development in Ohio tort law because it further erodes the employment-at-will doctrine. According to the author, \textit{Kulch} "marks the culmination of a trend in Ohio to expand the public policy exception doctrine and provide much needed protection for the rights of employees."\textsuperscript{119}

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{fn110}Id. at 330-31.
\bibitem{fn111}652 N.E.2d 653, 658 (Ohio 1995).
\bibitem{fn112}\textit{Kulch}, 677 N.E.2d at 332 (quoting \textit{Collins}, 652 N.E.2d at 661).
\bibitem{fn113}Id.
\bibitem{fn114}Id. at 332.
\bibitem{fn115}Id. at 333.
\bibitem{fn116}Id. at 334.
\bibitem{fn117}\textit{Kulch}, 677 N.E.2d at 334.
\bibitem{fn119}\textit{Clarifying the Public Policy}, supra note 118, at 683.
\end{thebibliography}
She argues that employees will now be able to "obtain full and fair redress" for wrongful treatment by employers and, at the same time, that this decision will promote Ohio public policies.\textsuperscript{120}

In addition to analyzing \textit{Kulch}, the author discusses \textit{Kulch}'s impact by focusing on two other Supreme Court public policy tort decisions. First, the author discusses \textit{Provens},\textsuperscript{121} a 1992 case in which the Supreme Court held that a public employee cannot bring a public policy claim for wrongful discharge based on the Ohio Constitution where other "reasonably satisfactory" remedies are available.\textsuperscript{122} The author suggests that this holding "does not make sense in light of \textit{Kulch}" and will have to be reexamined.\textsuperscript{123}

The second case, decided three months after \textit{Kulch}, is \textit{Livingston v. Hillside Rehabilitation Hospital}.\textsuperscript{124} There, the court of appeals had declined to recognize a public policy claim based on age discrimination because the applicable Ohio age discrimination statute already provided remedies that were as broad as those available under a Greeley claim.\textsuperscript{125} In a one-sentence opinion joined by five justices, the Supreme Court reversed and remanded the case "on the authority of \textit{Kulch}".\textsuperscript{126} The author of \textit{Clarifying the Public Policy} reads this decision to stand for the proposition that a plaintiff is entitled, not only to more expansive public remedies, but also to a jury trial.\textsuperscript{127}

Finally, the author suggests that after \textit{Kulch}, two issues are likely to come to the forefront. First, she argues that the predominant issue in future litigation is likely to be whether remedies set forth in a statute are exclusive or, alternatively, whether Greeley remedies will be available for violations of that statute.\textsuperscript{128} Second, as noted, the author argues that \textit{Provens} will have to be reconsidered.\textsuperscript{129}

\textsuperscript{120}Id. at 698. Further, the author argues that \textit{Kulch} (1) reaffirms the four-part test of Professor Perritt, enunciated in earlier court decisions; (2) reaffirms that a public policy claim can also be based on federal statutes, the state and federal constitutions, administrative rules and regulations, and the common law; and (3) recognizes that an employee can bring a public policy claim under OSHA even if he has failed to comply with the whistleblower statute. \textit{Id.} at 693-94.

\textsuperscript{121}Provens v. Stark County Bd. of Mental Retardation & Developmental Disabilities, 594 N.E.2d 959 (Ohio 1992).

\textsuperscript{122}Id. at syllabus.

\textsuperscript{123}\textit{Clarifying the Public Policy, supra} note 118, at 698.

\textsuperscript{124}680 N.E.2d 1220 (Ohio 1997).

\textsuperscript{125}Id. at 1227 (Cook, J., dissenting).

\textsuperscript{126}Id.

\textsuperscript{127}The author identifies the right to a jury trial as the "best avenue to obtain such a remedy." \textit{Clarifying the Public Policy, supra} note 118, at 697.

\textsuperscript{128}Id. at 698.

\textsuperscript{129}Id.
A. Kulch Has Usurped the Legislative Prerogative to Set Public Policy and Will Engender Further Confusion and Unpredictability

The unspoken premise behind Clarifying the Public Policy is that further erosion of the employment-at-will doctrine is a positive development, even if it is accomplished piecemeal and frustrates legislative intent. Whether the employment-at-will doctrine should be abolished, judicially, statutorily, or otherwise, is beyond the scope of this Article. Clarifying the Public Policy's wholesale endorsement of this premise, however, misses the mark with regard to two more fundamental questions, which it leaves unanswered.

First, should the Supreme Court of Ohio be creating public policy, and remedies to vindicate this policy, that are directly contrary to the remedies established by the General Assembly as part of a comprehensive statutory scheme? Second, even if the Court arguably is vested with the responsibility to shape new common-law remedies based on its vision of public policy, will this advance the twin goals of uniformity and predictability? We believe that the answer to both these questions is in the negative, and that this compels the conclusion that Kulch was decided incorrectly.

1. Kulch Has Usurped the Legislative Prerogative to Set Ohio Public Policy

Prior to enacting the whistleblower statute,130 the General Assembly weighed, and debated, the respective interests of the public, employees, and employers.131 The result is a statute that protects the rights of whistleblowers and the interests of the public, but also safeguards the rights of employers by imposing certain conditions upon employees who seek the protections of the statute.132 The statute sets forth the procedural requirements that employees must meet to qualify as whistleblowers, as well as the remedies that the General Assembly deemed appropriate.133


131. See Provens v. Stark County Bd. of Mental Retardation & Developmental Disabilities, 594 N.E.2d at 965 (stating "the more appropriate course for this court is to defer to the legislative process of weighing conflicting policy considerations and creating certain administrative bodies and processes...")

132. Section 4113.52 of the Ohio Revised Code provides that to qualify as a whistleblower under the statute, before going to the authorities with an alleged violation of law, an employee generally must orally notify the employer of the alleged violation, and then follow up with the employer in writing. If the violation is not corrected, or if the employer does not make a good-faith effort to correct the violation, within twenty-four hours, the employee may go to the appropriate authorities. An employee making such a report, however, also has a duty to make a reasonable and good-faith effort to determine the accuracy of any information reported. Id.

133. The available remedies include reinstatement, back wages, and reinstatement of fringe benefits and seniority rights. The court also may award a prevailing employee
Although other bodies might, of course, weigh the competing interests differently and arrive at different remedies, the legislature—not the courts—has been vested with primary responsibility for passing laws and setting Ohio public policy. As one court explained:

All questions of policy are for the determination of the legislature, and not for the courts. . . . Where courts intrude into their decrees their opinion on questions of public policy, they in effect constitute the judicial tribunals as lawmaking bodies in usurpation of the powers of the legislature.

Nothing in Kulch suggests that the court found the whistleblower statute to be defective. Instead, the court simply conducted its own assessment of the remedies therein and reached the conclusion that these remedies "are not adequate to fully compensate an aggrieved employee. . . ." In the court's view, the more expansive remedies available for a public policy tort claim merely "complement the limited remedies available under the Whistleblower Statute." This reasoning is unpersuasive. As the Kulch dissenters observed, the majority improperly "elevate[d] itself above the General Assembly as architect of Ohio's public policy." Decisions about the adequacy of statutory remedies are for the legislature, not for the courts. The Supreme Court of Ohio recently explained,

costs of the litigation, together with witness fees, attorney fees, and fees for any experts who testify at trial. Finally, if the court determines that the employer deliberately retaliated against an employee, it may award interest on the award of back pay.

---

134 Phung v. Waste Mgmt., Inc., 491 N.E.2d 1114 (Ohio 1986) ("The Ohio constitution delegates to the legislature the primary responsibility for protecting the welfare of employees.").

135 Watson v. Cleveland Chair Co., 789 S.W.2d 538, 540-41 (Tenn. 1989).


137 677 N.E.2d at 324.

138 Id.

139 Id. at 330 (Cook, J., dissenting).

140 Austin v. HealthTrust, Inc., 967 S.W.2d 400 (Tex. 1998). Discussing whether to recognize a common law cause of action for whistleblowers, the Austin court stated:

In enacting statutes that prohibit certain conduct in the employment area, the Legislature has carefully balanced competing interests and policies. This has resulted in statutes not only with diverse protec-
it is not a court’s function to pass judgment on the wisdom of the legislation, for that is the task of the legislative body which enacted the legislation.\textsuperscript{141}

The General Assembly could have included other remedies in the statute, but it did not. By including only the enumerated remedies, the legislature implicitly decided to exclude others.\textsuperscript{142} For a court to add remedies to those available under the statute on the basis that they are merely "complementary" is to rewrite the statute, which is beyond the scope of its authority.\textsuperscript{143}

Courts are ill-equipped to serve as policy-making bodies.\textsuperscript{144} Legislatures, not reviewing courts, have the expertise, and the resources, to hold hearings, take evidence, conduct studies, receive input from constituents, debate alternatives, and, ultimately, to arrive at an appropriate balance of competing concerns. A reviewing court has none of these resources and, therefore, is not...
well suited to "sit as a super-legislature to judge the wisdom or desirability of legislative policy determinations ...."\textsuperscript{145}

It is unclear what remains of statutory limits on whistleblower remedies after \textit{Kulch}. Apparently, if an employee can identify a public policy in a statute, rule, regulation, or common law that supports public safety, or perhaps another policy such as public health or morals, compensatory and punitive damages are potentially recoverable without regard to the limits in section 4113.52. After \textit{Kulch}, employees may argue that they can simply bypass the more limited remedies in section 4113.52 and seek unlimited compensatory and punitive damages, with the result being that the public policy exception will swallow the statutory rule.\textsuperscript{146}

\textbf{2. Kulch Has Engendered Further Confusion and Unpredictability in Ohio Employment Law}

In the last twelve years, the Ohio Supreme Court has vacillated on the scope of the public policy tort. In 1986, the Supreme Court decided \textit{Phung}, in which it declined to recognize a cause of action for wrongful discharge based on whistleblowing.\textsuperscript{147} Four years later, in \textit{Greeley}, the court did an about-face and held that such a cause of action exists. Justice Douglas, whose majority opinion for the court of appeals in \textit{Phung} was reversed in 1986, wrote for a 4-3 majority in the \textit{Greeley} decision.\textsuperscript{148}

Just two years later, in \textit{Tulloh}, the court held that a whistleblower claim based on common-law does not exist in Ohio.\textsuperscript{149} Now, in \textit{Kulch}, the court has come full circle by overruling \textit{Phung} and \textit{Tulloh} and recognizing that a common-law cause of action exists in Ohio for whistleblowing.

These decisions illustrate the confusion and uncertainty in this area and belie the suggestion in \textit{Clarifying the Public Policy} that \textit{Kulch} has "laid to rest once and

\textsuperscript{145}Alford v. Republic Steel Corp., 467 N.E.2d 567, 570-71 (Ohio Ct. App. 1983); \textit{see also} Pack v. Cleveland, 438 N.E.2d 434, 443 (Ohio 1982) (Brown, J., dissenting) ("A judiciary should not sit as a super legislature to judge the wisdom or desirability of legislative policy determinations.").

\textsuperscript{146}\textit{See, e.g.}, Daniel v. Carolina Sunrock Corp., 430 S.E.2d 306, 312 (N.C. Ct. App.) (Lewis, J., dissenting) (stating "eggshell sensitivity of . . . 'narrow exception' to the employment at will doctrine will virtually swallow the rule"), \textit{rev'd}, 435 N.E.2d 835 (1993) (reversal based on the reasons stated in Judge Lewis's dissent); Tatge v. Chambers & Owen, Inc., 565 N.W.2d 150, 152 (Wisc. Ct. App.) (explaining public policy exception for wrongful discharge "would become the rule and the at-will doctrine would be swallowed up where employers and employees sign restrictive covenants"), \textit{review granted}, 569 N.W.2d 589 (1997).

\textsuperscript{147}491 N.E.2d 1114 (Ohio 1986).

\textsuperscript{148}551 N.E.2d 981 (Ohio 1990).

\textsuperscript{149}584 N.E.2d 729 (Ohio 1992).
The reality is that a bare majority of the court supported the judgment and syllabus. The opinion authored by Justice Sweeney commanded only three votes, with Justice Pfeifer concurring in judgment and syllabus only. Therefore, the outcome of future cases is in doubt and may turn on changes in the composition of the court.

Although *Kulch* admittedly answers some questions, these answers may prove ephemeral. Moreover, *Kulch* raises other, troublesome questions. For example, how far will the public policy tort be extended, or retrenched, in subsequent decisions? What other sources of public policy will be found to support a wrongful discharge claim for whistleblowing? How explicit must a preemption clause in a statute be in order for the court to find preemption? If the legislature unambiguously preempts nonstatutory remedies, will the statute withstand a constitutional challenge? And, after *Kulch*, is *Provens* still good law as to a public employee's right to assert a public policy claim, or is the demise of this case imminent? Presumably, the Supreme Court intends to address these (and other) questions on a case-by-case basis.

One unfortunate result of the court's erratic decisionmaking is that employers and employees who seek to conform their conduct to the law are left in the dark as to what the law is, and what it will be in the foreseeable future.

---

150*Clarifying the Public Policy*, supra note 118, at 683.

151*Greeley, Tulloh, and Painter* were all decided by a 4-3 majority, at least as to the law of the syllabus.


153For example, *Kulch* clarifies that Ohio public policy claims may be based on the Occupational Safety and Health Act. It also reaffirms the four-part test enunciated by Professor Perritt for assessing the viability of public policy tort. *Kulch* v. Structural Fibers, Inc., 677 N.E.2d 308, 322 (Ohio 1997).

154In the *dicta* of *Kulch*, Justice Douglas suggested that the "public policy of this state demands a safe working environment" and that this "conclusion is supported by a host of statutes and constitutional provisions favoring safety in the workplace." *Id.*

155"Full development of the elements of the tort of wrongful discharge in violation of public policy in Ohio will result through litigation and resolution of future cases, as it is through this means that the common law develops." *Painter* v. *Graley*, 639 N.E.2d 51, 57 (Ohio 1994).
future. The court's unwillingness to be bound by *stare decisis*, together with its case-by-case approach and the internecine struggles within the court, only aggravate the problem.

B. Confusion and Unpredictability in Wrongful Discharge Litigation

Notwithstanding Ms. Rosenthal's position that clarity has been achieved through *Kulch*, the first post-*Kulch* decision illustrates that *Kulch* sowed new seeds of confusion. By remanding a public policy claim for age discrimination "on the authority of *Kulch*," in *Livingston*, the court has given the impression that a public policy claim is available on this basis. Unfortunately, the court provided absolutely no guidance to lower courts regarding the elements of this "claim," including how it interplays with statutory age discrimination claims.

---

156 A recent article explained some of the consequences of legal uncertainty. For example, some employers will be reluctant to terminate marginal employees, which may cause a reduced demand for new workers. Such uncertainty leads to a sort of "regressive tax" on potential employees. Wagoner, Jr., *supra* note 77, at 1825 n.101. In addition, an employer may retain marginal employees to avoid litigation, even where there is a labor surplus, which may result in less productivity, less efficient manufacturing, and increased employee morale problems. *Id.* at 1826 n.102.

157 *Id.* at 1826 n.109 ("The Supreme Court of Ohio has been rather cavalier when dealing with *stare decisis* in past public policy cases.").

158 *Takach v. American Med. Tech. Inc.*, 1998 Ohio App. LEXIS 638 (Ohio Ct. App. Feb. 19, 1998), *appeal allowed*, 696 N.E.2d 1088 (Ohio 1998), provides yet another example of the struggles within the court on the public policy issue. In *Takach*, the court of appeals rejected an employee's public policy claim based on the "open courts" amendment to the Ohio Constitution. There, the employee resigned when her employer placed restrictions on her job duties after she filed a products liability claim against one of the employer's suppliers. The appellate court affirmed the court's rejection of the employee's public policy discharge claim, noting that the supreme court had previously rejected a public policy claim based on the Ohio constitution. Apparently, the court intends to revisit this question because it has allowed a discretionary appeal of this case over the dissent of Chief Justice Moyer and Justices Cook and Lundberg Stratton.

159 There are other troubling aspects of this decision as well. The dissent notes that it is illogical to hold, as the majority does, that an Ohio public policy claim can be based on a federal statute (OSHA) that does not provide a private right of action. As it has done with the whistleblower statute, the court severs the federal policies of OSHA, which are premised on the legislative determination that the Secretary, and not private litigants, should enforce the statute, from the statutory remedies.


161 Justice Cook, in dissent, criticized the majority for failing to provide any legal analysis to support its decision: Given that *Kulch* was decided based on the perceived inadequacy of the statutorily prescribed remedy available to a discharged whistleblower, one would expect this case, where the age discrimination statute has no restriction on remedies, to be affirmed.

*Id.* at 1221.
Moreover, Ohio courts and federal courts construing Ohio law have struggled to understand the limits of the public policy tort as it presently exists. The recent decision of *Sutton v. Salkin*\(^{162}\) is, perhaps, illustrative. This case involved, not an employment dispute, but the enforceability of a preprinted arbitration clause that required a consumer to arbitrate disputes. The consumer sought to take her dispute to small claims court rather than arbitrate, as agreed upon in the contract. The municipal court ordered her to arbitrate.

The court of appeals reversed. After acknowledging that there is a "strong presumption" in favor of arbitration under these circumstances, the court nonetheless held that it would "circumvent the public policy favoring resolution of small claims" to enforce the arbitration clause.\(^{163}\) Particularly troublesome is the court's candid acknowledgement that its decision was not informed "by any statutory or judicially created authority ...."\(^{164}\) Unfortunately, this case signals that Ohio courts have moved a step closer to the position that judges can decide cases based on their personal views of what the law should be, in derogation of what the law is.

Two recent federal district court decisions also are illustrative of the uncertainty in this area. In *Dorricott v. Fairhill Center for Aging*,\(^ {165}\) the court dismissed a claim for wrongful discharge in violation of "the public policy against terminating employees who take leave."\(^ {166}\) Dorricott had taken a medical leave of absence for emotional distress associated with alleged sexual harassment. After she exhausted available medical leave, she requested an extension. The employer declined to extend the leave and warned the employee that she would be terminated if she did not return to work. When the employee failed to return to work, the employer discharged her.\(^ {167}\)

---

According to Justice Cook, the only difference between the age discrimination statute and the age discrimination public policy tort approved by the Livingston court was the right to a jury trial. *Id.* Since the General Assembly had not provided for a jury trial in the age discrimination statute, Justice Cook criticized the Livingston majority for substituting its personal public policy choice for a contrary public policy statement by the Ohio legislature.

This is not the first time that the court has decided a case involving wrongful discharge in violation of public policy under the discrimination statutes. In *Collins v. Rizkana*, 652 N.E.2d 653 (Ohio 1995), the court held that "a cause of action may be brought for wrongful discharge in violation of public policy based on sexual harassment/discrimination." *Id.* at syllabus.


\(^{163}\)Id. at *4.

\(^{164}\)Id.


\(^{166}\)Id. at 993.

\(^{167}\)Id. at 982 (internal citations omitted).
The employee brought claims for, among other things, retaliation for filing a sexual harassment charge and wrongful discharge in violation of public policy. After acknowledging Kulch, the Dorricott court stated:

Congress has obviously spoken on the issue of... family medical leave in the workplace by enacting comprehensive statutes as legislative statements of public policy in this area. As the Painter court noted, "Judicial policy preferences may not be used to override valid legislative enactments, for the legislature should be the final arbiter of public policy. Because the legislature has enunciated public policy and provided remedial schemes to protect employees in this area, this Court will not override the scheme. . . . "

Accordingly, it appears that this court gave Kulch a restrictive reading. Wallace v. Trumbull Memorial Hospital illustrates a contrary interpretation of the scope of Kulch. In that case, an employee brought an action for wrongful discharge in violation of public policy and for age and disability discrimination. Although the employee failed to state a claim under the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the employee’s age claim was time-barred, the Wallace court permitted the employee to pursue his public policy claim. Relying on Kulch, the district court stated: "[T]he mere existence of statutory remedies does not[ ], without more, operate to bar a claim for wrongful discharge unless the remedies available under the statute are sufficient to provide the complete relief that would otherwise be available in a common law cause of action for wrongful discharge."

Dorricott and Wallace provide further evidence that as a result of judicial expansion of the public policy tort, including Kulch, the decision to discharge an employee is fraught with uncertainty and presents greater risks than in the past.

IV. CONCLUSION

The Kulch decision reflects an attempt by the Supreme Court of Ohio to shape public policy, a role better left to the legislature. This decision will lead to

---

168 Id. at 993 (quoting Gall v. Quaker City Castings, 874 F. Supp. 161, 164 (N.D. Ohio 1995)).


170 Id. at 621.

171 Id.

greater confusion and unpredictability in an already muddled area of the law. We believe that in *Kulch*, the better course would have been for the Supreme Court to defer to the legislature, which carefully delineated the appropriate procedures and remedies for Ohio whistleblowers in the statute. Employers and employees alike can only hope that in the coming years, Ohio courts will demonstrate a more cautious approach when analyzing public policy, thereby bringing some stability to Ohio employment law.