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Runyon Reconsidered: The Future of Section 1981 as a Basis for Employment Discrimination Claims

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I. INTRODUCTION

On April 25, 1988, the Supreme Court ignited a controversy by announcing that it would reconsider its ruling in *Runyon v. McCrary*, a landmark 1976 civil rights decision, in a case currently before the Court.
Patterson v. McClean Credit Union. Runyon affirmed the right of certain minority groups to sue private entities for unlawful discrimination under 42 U.S.C. Section 1981. The decision largely settled the debate over whether laws enacted after the Civil War protected blacks from discrimination by private parties. Following the Court's 5-4 vote to schedule reargument, an unprecedented number of amicus briefs were filed, the majority of which urged the Court to reaffirm Runyon.

Patterson calls into question the origin of the present Section 1981. Even if the justices decide not to overturn Runyon, they still must decide whether Section 1981 reaches racial harassment in the workplace. Also raised as issues are the importance of the need for stability in the law and the potentially adverse impact on national civil rights policy of reconsideration and possible reversal of the Runyon case.

This Note discusses the elements of the controversy unleashed by the Court: the origin and operation of the present Section 1981 and its relation to Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as amended [hereinafter Title VII]. In addition, the Note treats the legal doctrines of state action and stare decisis with respect to Runyon and its progeny addressing employment discrimination. The Note concludes that reversal of Runyon could substantially unsettle American law and set national civil rights policy on a course back to the future.

II. SECTION 1981: THE CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1866

A. Historical Background

During the Reconstruction Era following the Civil War, Congress passed several civil rights statutes designed to give force to the newly
ratified thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments. Obviously, these laws were not enacted in anticipation of the modern problems of employment discrimination. Because the derivation of Section 1981 continues to generate controversy in the Supreme Court, its history must be carefully detailed.

Section 1981 was originally enacted as Section 1 of the Civil Rights Act of 1866. The 1866 Act was passed pursuant to the power of Congress to eradicate slavery, as expressed in the thirteenth amendment, which had been ratified in 1865. The statute was re-enacted as the Enforcement Act of 1870, after ratification of the fourteenth amendment in 1868, in order to eliminate any doubt that Congress had the constitutional authority to pass such legislation. Section 1 of the Enforcement Act simply re-enacted Section 1 of the 1866 Act, whereas Section 16, a second and new section, contained wording almost identical to the present Section 1981. Federal statutory law was codified in 1874; Section 1977 of the Revised Code of 1874 is identical to the present Section 1981.

The origin of Section 1981 forms the crux of the reconsideration of Runyon and could well form the basis of its reversal. The Runyon majority subscribed to the position that Section 1981 is derived from the 1866 Act as well as the 1870 Act. The Court therefore ruled that Section 1981 validly reached private, in addition to public, racial discrimination based upon Congress' thirteenth amendment power. However, Justice White, joined by Justice Rehnquist in his Runyon dissent, asserted that Section 18 of the 1870 Act (Section 1 of the 1866 Act) was eliminated in the 1874 codification, and Section 1981 is based solely on the new, second section of the 1870 Act, Section 16. Consequently, in his view, Section 1981 is based exclusively on the fourteenth amendment and is limited to situations involving state action.

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13 Reiss, supra note 12, at 963.
15 The original version of Section 1 protected both contractual and property rights from discrimination. This version was later recodified into two statutes. Today Section 1981 applies to contractual rights, while Section 1982 applies to property rights. Note, National Origin Discrimination under Section 1981, 51 FORDHAM L. REV. 919, 919 n.1 (1983).
16 Act of Apr. 9, 1866, ch. 31, § 1, 14 Stat. 27.
17 Act of May 31, 1870, ch. 114, §§ 16, 18, 16 Stat. 144. It is also called the Voting Rights Act of 1870.
18 Reiss, supra note 12, at 971 n.48.
19 Id.
21 Id. at 195-205. For further discussion of Runyon, see infra Part III.
B. Scope and Coverage

1. Type of Employer

a. Private Employers

Although Section 1981 appears to prohibit a broad range of private and public discriminatory actions, the statute has been narrowly interpreted for most of its history. In 1883, the Supreme Court struck down legislation forbidding discrimination in public accommodation, ruling that Congress did not have the power under either the thirteenth or the fourteenth amendment to reach purely private acts of discrimination. Although Section 1981 was not directly involved in that case, the Court announced that Section 1981 should be restricted to situations involving "state action." As recently as 1948, the Court expressly required "governmental action" in a suit based on the Civil Rights Acts of 1866 and 1870.

More than one hundred years after passage of the statute, the Supreme Court, in Jones v. Alfred H. Mayer Co., finally dispensed with the state action requirement and held that the 1866 Act reached wholly private acts of discrimination. The Court reasoned that when Congress included the word "custom" in Section 1 of the 1866 Act, it plainly meant to protect the rights guaranteed therein against interference from any source, private or governmental. Jones concerned the application of Section 1982, the companion statute of Section 1981, so its logic was soon applied to Section 1981.

After Jones, a number of cases were filed under Section 1981, alleging that employment discrimination in the private sector constituted a violation of the statute. In each case, the courts of appeals upheld Section 1981 as affording a remedy for private acts of employment discrimination based on race. Moreover, courts of appeals and district courts held Sec-
tion 1981 applicable to discrimination by labor unions. Finally, in the landmark case of *Johnson v. Railway Express Agency, Inc.*, the Supreme Court espoused a similar view: "[I]t is now well settled among the federal courts of appeals—and we now join them—that Section 1981 affords a federal remedy against discrimination in private employment on the basis of race."34

b. Public Employers

For most of its early history, Section 1981 was interpreted to apply exclusively to public discrimination involving governmental action. However, in *Brown v. General Service Administration*, the Supreme Court decided that Section 717 of Title VII provides the exclusive remedy for federal employees who claim to have suffered unlawful discrimination. This has all but eliminated the use of Section 1981 against federal defendants. Section 1981 may only be used in those few cases where discrimination in federal employment is not covered by Title VII.37 The Fifth and Eighth Circuits are divided on the question of whether the *Brown* exclusivity of remedy principle means that unions, which do not come within Section 717(a), may not be sued under Section 1981.38

Section 1981 covers local governmental entities and officials. However, it appears that state governmental entities are protected by sovereign immunity under the eleventh amendment.40

2. Bases of Discrimination

a. Race

Because Section 1981 was a direct response to the liberation of the slaves, the statute clearly proscribes racial discrimination in the making

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34 Id. at 459-60.
35 Reiss, *supra* note 12, at 975 n.69.
38 Jennings v. American Postal Workers Union, Local 8, 672 F.2d 712 (8th Cir. 1982) (exclusivity of remedy under Title VII does not preclude action under Section 1981 against union representing federal employees); Newbold v. U.S. Postal Service, 614 F.2d 46 (5th Cir.) (exclusivity of remedy under Title VII means that labor organizations representing federal employees may not be sued under Section 1981 even though not covered by Section 717), *cert. denied*, 449 U.S. 878 (1980).
40 Id.
and enforcement of employment and union contracts.\footnote{M. Player, Employment Discrimination Law § 8.02 (1988).} It protects not only black persons but broadly prohibits all racial discrimination in contracts. Accordingly, whites are offered the same standard of protection under Section 1981 as are blacks.\footnote{McDonald v. Santa Fe Trail Transp. Co., 427 U.S. 273 (1976).} Cases of "reverse discrimination," in which white employees claim to be the direct victims of policies and practices favoring nonwhites, comprise one category of claims filed by whites under Section 1981.\footnote{Reiss, supra note 12, at 985.}

A second category includes situations where whites experience discrimination because of their association with blacks.\footnote{Id.} In this category, at least one court permitted whites to sue under Section 1981 when they were the direct objects of discrimination due to their dealings with blacks.\footnote{DeMatteis v. Eastman Kodak Co., 511 F.2d 306 (2nd Cir. 1975) (white discharged for selling his home to a black had a claim cognizable under Section 1981).} In a third category of cases, courts have sometimes denied standing to whites who sued under Section 1981 where they were not the immediate victims of discrimination, but sought rather to challenge practices that allegedly discriminated against blacks.\footnote{Contra Waters v. Heublein, Inc., 547 F.2d 466 (9th Cir. 1976), cert. denied, 433 U.S. 915 (1977).}

b. Gender

It is now widely accepted that Section 1981 does not cover discrimination based on gender.\footnote{B. Schlei & P. Grossman, supra note 12, at 674.} The overwhelming weight of authority, from Runyon\footnote{427 U.S. at 167 (Section 1981 does not address discrimination based on religion or sex).} to St. Francis College v. Al-Khazraji,\footnote{491 U.S. 604 (1987).} states so. Nevertheless, the fact that Section 1981 does not address sex discrimination should be clarified: black women are definitely protected when they assert claims based on race,\footnote{Black women have brought hundreds of suits under Section 1981. One in particular, Brady v. Bristol-Meyers, Inc., 459 F.2d 621 (8th Cir. 1972), was subsequently cited with approval by the Supreme Court in Johnson v. Railway Express Agency, Inc., 421 U.S. 454, 459 n.6 (1975).} while black men are not covered when they file suits based on sex.\footnote{Smith v. Liberty Mutual Ins. Co., 395 F. Supp. 1098 (N.D. Ga. 1975) (court rejected portion of plaintiff's complaint alleging refusal to hire due to sex), aff'd, 569 F.2d 325 (7th Cir. 1978).}

It is worth noting that even the modern Title VII, when proposed, did not include sex discrimination. This basis was added by amendment during floor debate in the House, probably to prevent passage of the bill.\footnote{C. Whalen & B. Whalen, The Longest Debate: A Legislative History of the 1964 Civil Rights Act 115-18 (1985).}
It is highly unlikely that, a century earlier, Congress intended to eradicate sex discrimination under the thirteenth amendment.\textsuperscript{53}

c. Religion

In general, Section 1981 will not support claims based on religion because religious discrimination is not a type of discrimination based on race or color.\textsuperscript{54} When lower federal courts utilized a quasi-scientific distinction based on "race" (Negroid, Caucasoid, and Mongoloid), plaintiffs received protection only if they alleged discrimination due to membership in one of the races (i.e., Caucasian favored over Chinese, claim sustained).\textsuperscript{55}

Subsequently, the Supreme Court broadened and refined the definition of "race" discrimination to such an extent that certain instances of religious discrimination came within Section 1981.\textsuperscript{56} The Court reasoned: "Congress intended to protect from discrimination identifiable classes of persons who are subjected to intentional discrimination solely because of their ancestry or ethnic characteristics. Such discrimination is racial discrimination that Congress intended Section 1981 to forbid, whether or not it would be classified as racial in terms of modern scientific theory."\textsuperscript{57} Thus, plaintiffs who establish intentional discrimination because they are Arabs, Orientals, or Jews (peoplehood), rather than solely because they are Moslems, Buddhists, or Jews (believers), meet the Court's criteria and would likely prevail under Section 1981.\textsuperscript{58}

\textbf{d. Alienage and National Origin}

Despite the Supreme Court's description of the rights protected as racial, the Court has extended Section 1981 to apply to aliens.\textsuperscript{59} The decisions do not specify whether aliens can assert a claim of alienage-based
discrimination or are limited to claims of racial discrimination. Until recently, the Fifth Circuit held that Section 1981 prohibited employment discrimination against Mexican-American aliens based on their lack of citizenship. It would be probable that the more closely alienage can be linked to "identifiable" ethnicity or ancestry, the stronger a claim under Section 1981.

The majority of courts have held that national origin is not per se covered by Section 1981. But again, the overwhelming majority of courts allow persons of differing national origins to proceed if they allege discrimination because they are "non-white."

e. Other Bases

Section 1981 protects against retaliation for filing a claim under it or other statutes, such as Title VII, that forbid race discrimination. Even if the allegation of racial discrimination lacks merit, the employer who acts against the employee for filing suit violates Section 1981.

Section 1981 does not maintain causes of action for age discrimination. Section 1981 is applicable to harms involving hiring, promotion, and discharge. As mentioned, Patterson raises the issue of whether harassment of a current employee because of race states a claim under Section 1981. Since Section 1981 guarantees the making and enforcement of contracts as enjoyed by white citizens, working condition discrimination based upon race, including wage differences, should come within the scope of the statute.

C. Procedures, Standards, and Remedies

1. Procedural Aspects

Federal jurisdiction over Section 1981 claims now derives from 28
U.S.C. Section 1342(4), which grants original jurisdiction without regard to the amount in controversy. Although Section 1981 initially provided for federal jurisdiction “exclusively of the courts of the several states,” the restriction on state court jurisdiction has been omitted, so it is unclear whether state courts would have concurrent jurisdiction.

Section 1981 contains no statute of limitations, and there is no specifically stated federal statute of limitations for claims arising under the Reconstruction Era civil rights laws. Therefore, the controlling statute of limitations is determined by the most analogous state law. Courts have used a state statute of limitations for actions based upon a liability created by statute, for contract actions, tort actions, actions for civil rights damages, or the state’s catchall statute of limitations. The state statute of limitations for bringing suit under Section 1981 is not tolled by filing a charge with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, charging the defendant with the same alleged discriminatory act. Because actions under Section 1981 are considered actions at law to remedy a civil harm, a plaintiff who seeks damages, as opposed to purely equitable relief, has a right to a trial by jury. The demand for a jury trial must be timely.

There are no administrative prerequisites to suit under Section 1981. The defendant does not have to meet a statutory definition of “employer” or “labor organization”: the person who makes the employment decision incurs liability. There is no minimum size requirement for coverage, nor is a connection to interstate commerce mandated.

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70 28 U.S.C. § 1343(4) (1982) provides: “The district courts shall have original jurisdiction of any civil action authorized by law to be commenced by any person to recover damages or to secure equitable or other relief under any Act of Congress providing for the protection of civil rights, including the right to vote.”
71 B. SCHLEI & P. GROSSMAN, supra note 12, at 691-92.
72 Act of April 9, 1866, § 3, 14 Stat. 27.
73 B. SCHLEI & P. GROSSMAN, supra note 12, at 692.
74 M. PLAYER, supra note 41, at 617.
75 B. SCHLEI & P. GROSSMAN, supra note 12, at 692.
76 M. PLAYER, supra note 41, at 617.
77 CAL. CIV. PROC. CODE § 338(1) (West 1954).
82 M. PLAYER, supra note 41, at 618.
83 Id. at 618.
84 Harris v. Richards Mfg. Co., Inc., 675 F.2d 811 (6th Cir. 1982).
85 B. SCHLEI & P. GROSSMAN, supra note 12, at 693.
86 M. PLAYER, supra note 41, at 615.
87 Id.
2. Standards of Proof

The language of Section 1981 does not address motive; it does not create absolute liability, nor does it premise liability upon the impact of employment decisions. For years, courts regarded the Civil Rights Act of 1866 and Title VII as analogous and applied the statutory principles of Title VII, which does not require proof of discriminatory intent or purpose, to Section 1981 claims.

However, the Supreme Court held in a recent decision that Section 1981 reaches only purposeful discrimination, and consequently, distinctions which are neutral on their face but adversely affect a protected class do not violate the law.

Courts have decided that Section 1981 violations may be established under standards developed for Title VII. The model of proving individual disparate treatment announced in McDonnell Douglas Corp. v. Green is appropriate. A plaintiff can show a prima facie case of discriminatory motivation by establishing that he/she was a member of a protected class, sought a position for which the defendant was seeking applicants, was qualified for the vacant position, and was rejected while the employer continued to seek other applicants. These elements create an initial inference of improper motivation which shifts to the employer the burden of articulating a legitimate nondiscriminatory reason for the adverse action. If the defendant fails to provide a reason, the plaintiff prevails; if the defendant produces one, the plaintiff must then introduce evidence that the reason was a pretext to disguise illegal intent in order to prevail.

Additionally, illegal intent can be demonstrated by the use of statistics. If the plaintiff can generate data eliminating chance as the cause of the adverse impact, the burden of proof will shift to the defendant to successfully challenge the plaintiff’s statistical showing or to provide a legitimate explanation for the observed result. Of course, because the court has rejected liability based on adverse impact, objective selection criteria, such as tests and credentials, are analyzed only as to motivation for their use.

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88 Id. at 616.
92 M. Player, supra note 41, at 616.
94 M. Player, supra note 41, at 616-17. However, if a plaintiff has direct evidence of discriminatory intent, the defendant must then show that it would have made the same decision even if it had not considered the prohibited factor. Id.
95 Id. at 617.
96 See Gay v. Waiters’ and Dairy Lunchmen’s Union, Local No. 30, 694 F.2d 531 (9th Cir. 1982).
97 M. Player, supra note 41, at 617.
3. Remedies

The Supreme Court has held that an individual who establishes a cause of action under Section 1981 is entitled to equitable as well as legal relief, including compensatory and, in some circumstances, punitive damages. A successful plaintiff might receive the job illegally denied and back wages, and recover for consequential loss, such as loss of credit and job opportunities, and for personal injuries such as pain, suffering, and humiliation. In cases of proven malicious or wanton misconduct, a discriminatee may recover punitive damages against those responsible for the harm, with the exception of state and municipal entities.

D. Relation to Title VII

Congress enacted Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as a comprehensive federal fair employment statute. In 1972, Congress substantially enlarged the coverage of Title VII, making it applicable for the first time to federal, state, and local governmental bodies in addition to a broader range of private parties. The 1964 Act also created the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission [hereinafter the Commission or E.E.O.C.], which may investigate and conciliate charges of discrimination or institute civil actions on behalf of discriminatees and “pattern and practice” suits where appropriate. The Commission has promulgated procedural regulations and substantive guidelines which furnish a detailed source of employment discrimination law.
Title VII proscribes discrimination based upon race, color, sex, religion and national origin. The Act further prohibits retaliation against persons who oppose discriminatory practices, who file charges, or who participate in any proceedings under the Act. Title VII covers employers, unions, employment agencies, and joint labor-management committees, and applies to virtually every employment practice: recruitment, hiring, job assignments, promotions, transfers, benefits, other terms and conditions of employment, layoffs, discharges, and harassment and intimidation.

Coverage under Title VII extends as far as Congress can reach under its power to regulate interstate commerce. However, unlike Section 1981, Title VII is fraught with numerous jurisdictional and procedural requirements, including minimum defendant size, employer-employee relationship, timeliness, Commission processing, and receipt of a notice of the right to sue. Generally, discrimination charges have been processed by the Commission on a first-come, first-served basis; however, a backlog accumulated in the first decade of the statute's existence and newly filed charges often had to wait several years for administrative processing to commence. Although the time required for processing a Title VII charge has since decreased, a very small percentage of charges closed with a reasonable cause determination.

Despite the comprehensive and complex procedural scheme of Title VII, the Supreme Court has ruled that the statute itself expressly preserved alternative and parallel remedies. Current practice often has a plaintiff in a race discrimination case joining Title VII and Section 1981 claims.

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109 Reiss, supra note 12, at 961 n.8.
111 See supra note 103. However, a state or local fair employment practices agency may have a lower minimum size requirement and be able to reach the employer when E.E.O.C. has no jurisdiction.
112 "[N]umerous courts have held that Title VII does not apply to discrimination involving an actual or potential independent contractor relationship." B. SCHLEI & P. GROSSMAN, supra note 12, at 997.
113 There is a 180/300-day charge-filing period and a 90-day suit-filing period. Id. at 1015.
114 This may include a fact-finding conference, an investigation, a plant tour, and, if there is reasonable cause to believe the law has been violated, conciliation. Id. at 933-82. Furthermore, in deferral jurisdictions, the same procedures may be followed by a state or local fair employment practices agency before E.E.O.C. begins its case processing. Id. at 941-42.
115 A discriminatee may not file in court under Title VII unless a charge is first filed with the Commission and statutory notice of right to sue is issued. Id. at 967.
116 Id. at 939 n. 54.
117 Id. at 938 n.52.
118 Id. at 950 n.144.
120 M. PLAYER, supra note 41, at 619.
Benefits of this strategy include the ability to survive any procedural failures in the Title VII case and the availability under Section 1981 but not Title VII of compensatory and punitive damages.  

III. RUNYON AND ITS PROGENY

A. Runyon v. McCrary

In Runyon, the parents of black children who were refused admission to several private schools because the schools were not integrated and accepted only "members of the caucasian race" sued under Section 1981. The district court held that the schools' racially discriminatory admissions policy violated Section 1981, enjoined the schools from discriminating against applicants on the basis of race, awarded compensatory damages to the plaintiffs, and assessed attorneys' fees against each school.

The Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit affirmed the district court's grant of equitable and compensatory relief, but reversed its award of attorneys' fees. The court agreed that Section 1981 is a "limitation upon private discrimination," and further rejected the schools' assertion that their racially discriminatory policies are shielded by a constitutional right of privacy or of freedom of association.

The Supreme Court affirmed the decision of the appeals court, holding that Section 1981 prohibits private, commercially operated, non-sectarian schools from denying admission to prospective students because they are black, and that Section 1981 is constitutional as so applied. In arriving at its decision on the reach of the statute, the Court examined the powers granted to the commissioners who prepared the draft of the 1874 codification of federal statutory law. The Court reasoned that the commissioners did not intend to recommend to Congress that any portion of Section 1 of the Civil Rights Act of 1866 be repealed upon the enactment of the

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121 Id. Title VII empowers the courts to fashion equitable relief, which emphasizes "making whole" victims of discrimination and eradicating discriminatory practices. Id. at 436.


123 This included the Southern Independent School Association, which had sought and been granted permission to intervene as a party defendant against the Runyons, the proprietors of Bobbe's School. The organization is a nonprofit association of six state private school associations, representing 395 private schools, many of which denied admission to blacks. Id.


125 The appellate court also upheld an earlier ruling of the district court that Virginia's two-year statute of limitations for personal injury actions, applied to Section 1981 suits filed in that state, barred the damages claim of one set of parents. McCray v. Runyon, 515 F.2d 1082 (4th Cir. 1975, aff'd 427 U.S. 160 (1976).

126 515 F.2d 1082, 1086 (1975).

127 Id. at 1086, 1088.

128 427 U.S. at 186.
1874 revision because they had the authority\textsuperscript{129} to designate which statutes or parts of statutes ought to be repealed and explain their reasons for such repeal, but did not indicate a recommended change for the future Section 1981.\textsuperscript{130} The Court noted that in past decisions it had expressed the view that Section 16 of the 1870 Act was a reenactment of certain language in Section 1 of the 1866 Act,\textsuperscript{131} and that Section 1981 reached private employment contracts.\textsuperscript{132} The Court concluded that there is no basis for inferring that Congress did not understand the draft legislation which became Section 1981 to be drawn from both Section 1 of the 1866 Act and Section 16 of the 1870 Act; to hold otherwise would contradict Congress' delineation of the revision/repeal procedures and conflict with a previous decision.\textsuperscript{133} As a further indication of congressional agreement that Section 1981 reaches private acts of racial discrimination, the Court noted that Congress specifically considered and rejected an amendment\textsuperscript{134} to Title VII which would have repealed the Civil Rights Act of 1866 as a basis for private-sector discrimination suits.\textsuperscript{135}

With regard to the constitutionality of Section 1981 as applied, the Court determined that the right of freedom of association and the right of privacy were not violated.\textsuperscript{136} While parents may have a first amendment right to send their children to schools that support the belief that racial segregation is desirable, "it does not follow that the \textit{practice} of excluding racial minorities from such institutions is also protected by the same principle."\textsuperscript{137} With respect to the right of privacy, "it does not follow that because government is largely or even entirely precluded from regulating the child-bearing decision, it is similarly restricted by the Constitution from regulating the implementation of parental decisions concerning a child's education."\textsuperscript{138} Section 1981, as applied to racial discrimination that interferes with the making and enforcement of contracts for private ed-

\textsuperscript{129} The commissioners were appointed pursuant to the Act of June 27, 1866, 14 Stat. 74, re-enacted by the Act of May 4, 1870, c.72, 16 Stat. 96, and given authority to revise, simplify, and consolidate all statutes dealing with similar subjects. \textit{Id.} at 168 n.8. Under Section 3 of the Act of June 27, 1866, they were to designate such statutes or parts of statutes that, in their judgment, ought to be repealed, with their reasons for such repeal. \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{130} \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{131} Georgia v. Rachel, 384 U.S. 780, 790-91 (1966).


\textsuperscript{133} 427 U.S. at 168 n.8.

\textsuperscript{134} Senator Hruska proposed an amendment which would have made Title VII and the Equal Pay Act the sole sources of federal relief for employment discrimination. 118 \textsc{Cong. Rec.} 3371 (1972). The Senate, however, was persuaded by Senator Williams to not repeal "the first major piece of civil rights legislation in this Nation's history" and rejected the proposed amendment. \textit{Id.} at 3372-73. \textit{See generally} Note, \textit{Is Section 1981 Modified by Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964?}, 1970 \textsc{Duke L.J.} 1223 (Title VII complements Section 1981).

\textsuperscript{135} 427 U.S. at 174.

\textsuperscript{136} \textit{Id.} at 175. The Court also declared that Section 1981 as applied did not violate a parent's right to direct the education of his children. \textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{137} \textit{Id.} at 176.

\textsuperscript{138} \textit{Id.} at 178.
ucation, constitutes an exercise of federal legislative power under Section 2 of the thirteenth amendment, and promotes goals closely analogous to those served by Section 1981's eradication of racial discrimination in the making of private employment contracts.

Justice White, joined by Justice Rehnquist, dissented in Runyon. First, Justice White argued that the right to contract conferred by Section 1981 means only that nonwhites, as well as whites, cannot be precluded from entering into contracts with willing parties. Section 1981 would thus invalidate any state statute or court-made rule which would disable blacks or any other class of persons from making or enforcing contracts; it would not prohibit a defendant's refusal to deal with any individual, on the basis of race or for any other reason.

Second, Justice White contended that the legislative history of Section 1981 confirmed that the statute prohibits any legal rule disabling any person from making or enforcing a contract, but does not proscribe private racially motivated refusals to contract. In particular, he noted that the revisers' notes to the 1874 codification of federal statutes clearly designate Section 16 of the 1870 Act as the source for Section 1977 (the present Section 1981). Since the 1870 Act was passed pursuant to Congress' fourteenth amendment power, Section 16 was designed to require equal treatment under the law and not by private individuals. Also, the 1870 Act was partly intended to protect Chinese aliens, who were plainly not covered by Section 1 of the 1866 Act. Finally, in response to the majority opinion that Section 1981 derived from both the 1866 Act and the 1870 Act, Justice White asserted that Congress repealed the contract rights part of Section 1 of the 1866 Act in 1874, by Section 5596 of the Revised Statutes.

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139 Id. at 179. "Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation." U.S. CONST. amend. XIII, § 2.
140 427 U.S. at 179.
141 Id. at 194 (White, J., dissenting). Assent has always been central to the concept of a contract; whites have no right to contract with an unwilling private person, no matter what that person's motivation for refusing to bargain.
142 Id.
143 Id. at 195.
144 Id. at 195 n.6.
145 "[N]or shall any State ... deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws." U.S. CONST. amend. XIV, § 1.
146 427 U.S. at 202 (White, J., dissenting).
147 Id. at 200.
148 Id. at 202. The 1866 Act applied only to citizens.
149 The property rights portion of Section 1 of the 1866 Act was codified as Section 1978 of the Revised Statutes (the current 42 U.S.C. Section 1982). Id. at 207 n.12. See supra note 15.
150 427 U.S. at 207. "All acts of Congress passed prior to said first day of December one thousand eight hundred and seventy-three, any portion of which is embraced in any section of said revision, are hereby repealed, and the section applicable thereto shall be in force in lieu thereof." Id. (quoting in part Section 5596 of the Revised Statutes).
Although Justice Stevens attributed to the legislative history of Section 1981 an intent only to guarantee all citizens the same legal capacity to make and enforce contracts, he nevertheless concurred with the majority in the interest of stability and orderly development of the law. Justice Stevens felt that *Jones v. Alfred H. Mayer Co.*, on which *Runyon* rests, had been wrongly decided, but declined to overrule it since it reflects the prevailing mores and current national policy. Moreover, "the labor of judges would be increased almost to the breaking point if every past decision could be reopened in every case, and one could not lay one's own course of bricks on the secure foundation of the courses laid by others who had gone before him." Justice Powell concurred with the majority on the strength of *Jones*, but added that if the slate were clean, he might be inclined to agree with Justice White that Section 1981 was not intended to restrict private contractual choices. Thus, with two members of the majority expressing doubt that the opinion's rationale was sound, *Runyon* was a closer decision than the 7-2 vote might indicate.

B. Reliance on Runyon

Cases decided in the years following *Runyon* often relied upon it as establishing or confirming that Section 1981 reaches acts of private discrimination. Several decisions reiterated the legislative history of the statute as delineated in the majority opinion. One case cited *Runyon* as holding that Title VII had not repealed earlier civil rights legislation.
Runyon has served as the definitive source that Section 1981 does not cover claims of sex discrimination.\textsuperscript{161} Several courts employed it to dismiss Section 1981 suits alleging discrimination based upon national origin,\textsuperscript{162} although others interpreted it more generally as authorizing only claims of “racial” discrimination.\textsuperscript{163} On occasion, courts noted that Runyon also eliminates religion as a Section 1981 basis of discrimination.\textsuperscript{164}

A few cases referred to Runyon in acknowledging the propriety of compensatory damages in Section 1981 actions.\textsuperscript{165} Others relied on Runyon to uphold application of state and local statutes of limitation to Section 1981 claims.\textsuperscript{166}


\textsuperscript{163} Leon v. Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago, 823 F.2d 928, 931 (6th Cir. 1987) (Section 1981 redresses only racial discrimination); Irby v. Sullivan, 737 F.2d 1418, 1430 n.22 (5th Cir. 1984) (race or other “non-white” status); Stones v. Los Angeles Community College Dist., 572 F. Supp. 1072, 1079 n.4 (C.D. Cal. 1983) (Section 1981 is limited to a prohibition of racial discrimination). aff'd, 796 F.2d 270 (9th Cir. 1986); Foreman v. General Motors Corp., 473 F. Supp. 166, 177 (E.D. Mich. 1979) (racial discrimination and only racial discrimination proscribed); Apodaca v. General Electric Co., 445 F. Supp. 821, 823 (D.N.M. 1978) (Section 1981 protects all racial groups that have been victims of racial discrimination).

\textsuperscript{164} E.g. Manzanares v. Safeway Stores, Inc., 593 F.2d 968, 971 (10th Cir. 1979); Ortiz v. Bank of America, 547 F. Supp. 550, 557 n.10 (E.D. Cal. 1982).


Brenda Patterson began employment as a teller and file coordinator for the McClean Credit Union on May 5, 1972. She was still a file clerk in 1982 when she was permanently laid off, after denials of raises and promotion. Her allegations against the defendant included charges of racial harassment. Patterson received a notice of right to sue from the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission on July 5, 1983, and filed suit on January 25, 1984. Because the 90-day statute of limitations had expired on her Title VII claim, she framed her suit as a violation of her right to enjoy her employment contract as protected by Section 1981 and Runyon.

A week-long jury trial in the U.S. District Court for the Middle District of North Carolina in November of 1985 ended in the dismissal of Patterson's entire case. The court ruled that a claim for racial harassment is not cognizable under Section 1981, and instructed the jury that Patterson had to show that she was better qualified than the white employee promoted over her in order to prevail on that count. The jury found against Patterson.

The Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed. The court termed Section 1981 a narrower prohibition of discrimination and ruled that racial harassment affected the terms and conditions of employment, rather than the right to make and enforce employment contracts, and therefore did not violate the rights protected by Section 1981 and Runyon.

The Supreme Court granted review on October 5, 1987, in order to consider whether Runyon should be extended to bar racial harassment and discriminatory promotion. The Court heard argument on February 29, 1988, but ignited a controversy less than two months later when it

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167 Patterson v. McClean Credit Union, 805 F.2d 1143, 1144 (4th Cir. 1986).
168 Id. at 1146. She contended, for instance, that her boss made her sweep the office, while white file clerks were not required to do this, stared at her to such extent that she was distracted from her job, publicly criticized her work, and made racist comments. Reidinger, supra note 10, at 78.
169 Id. at 79.
170 42 U.S.C. § 2000e-5(e) (1982). Thus, Patterson is a classic example of § 1981 overcoming a procedural pitfall of Title VII.
171 Reidinger, supra note 10, at 79.
172 Id.
173 Id.
174 805 F.2d at 1144. The jury also found for McClean on the discharge issue.
175 Id. at 1145.
176 Id. at 1145-56.
177 Reidinger, supra note 10, at 79.
178 Id. No one could have expected the organized outcry generated by the order. By early June, a coalition of 112 civic groups, 47 state attorneys general, 66 U.S. senators, and 118 members of the House of Representatives were preparing amicus briefs in defense of Runyon. Id. at 80.
ordered the case restored to the calendar for reargument. Neither side had originally raised the question that the Court ordered briefed: whether or not the interpretation of 42 U.S.C. Section 1981 adopted by the Court in Runyon should be reconsidered.

At oral argument held last October, Patterson's attorney maintained that Section 1981 originated in the Civil Rights Act of 1866, which was passed pursuant to Congress' thirteenth amendment power and was part of a comprehensive attempt to prohibit all forms of discrimination or other attempts to subjugate former slaves. He asserted that Runyon correctly decided that the statute reaches private acts of discrimination; furthermore, the doctrine of stare decisis precludes the Court from overturning statutory precedent that is in line with society and in which Congress had acquiesced.

McClean's lawyer contended that Section 1981 is a recodification of a provision of the 1870 Enforcement Act. As such it is a fourteenth amendment statute requiring state action and cannot be construed to reach private discrimination. He argued that by expanding the scope of Section 1981, the Court had ignored the 1964 Civil Rights Act, thereby allowing an employee to gain both compensatory and punitive damages, to circumvent the role of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, to sidestep Title VII's preference for conciliation, and to diminish the role of federalism under Title VII. He concluded that given the availability of remedies enacted in recent years, reversal of Runyon and a more restricted scope for Section 1981 would have little practical impact.

Reconsideration of Runyon implicates both constitutional and legal questions: whether Congress has the thirteenth amendment authority to reach private acts of discrimination, and whether five justices think Runyon is wrong enough to be overturned despite the widely agreed upon need for stability in the law. These issues of state action and stare decisis, respectively, will be discussed in the next section. Ironically, the original question raised by Patterson—whether Runyon covers racial harassment and discrimination in the workplace—may never be answered.

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179 Supreme Court Order Scheduling Reargument of Civil Rights Case, supra note 1, at D-1.
180 Id.
181 See supra note 8 and accompanying text.
183 Reidinger, supra note 10, at 80.
184 Id.
185 See supra notes 107-114 and accompanying text.
186 57 U.S.L.W. at 3292.
187 Reidinger, supra note 10, at 81.
188 Id.
IV. LEGAL DOCTRINES

A. State Action

Section 1 of the thirteenth amendment prohibits slavery and involuntary servitude within the United States or any place under their jurisdiction.\(^{189}\) Section 2 endows Congress with the power to enforce this prohibition by appropriate legislation.\(^{190}\) Initially, the Supreme Court interpreted Section 2 as a narrow grant of power. Although the Court declared that the amendment authorized Congress to regulate private conduct as well as state action,\(^{191}\) such legislation could address only "slavery and its incidents."\(^{192}\) The Court relied upon the long existence of African slavery in America as providing very distinct notions of what it was and what its necessary incidents were.\(^{193}\) In "abolishing all badges and incidents of slavery,"\(^{194}\) Congress could not "adjust what may be called the social rights of men and races in the community; but only . . . declare and vindicate those fundamental rights which appertain to the essence of citizenship, and the enjoyment or deprivation of which constitutes the essential distinction between freedom and slavery."\(^{195}\) The Court concluded that it would be running the slavery argument into the ground to apply it to every act of discrimination which a person may make as to the guests he will take into his coach or cab or car, or admit to his concert or theatre, or deal with in other matters of business.\(^{196}\)

Subsequent decisions further limited congressional power.\(^{197}\) However,
in *Jones v. Alfred H. Mayer Co.*, the Court rejected the notion that the scope of congressional power was significantly hampered by any judicially defined concept of slavery and declared that Congress has the power under the thirteenth amendment to determine what are the badges and incidents of slavery and the power to translate that determination into effective legislation.

A literal reading of *Jones* endows Congress with the authority to protect individual rights under the thirteenth amendment. This authority is as limitless as the congressional power to regulate interstate commerce. It would appear that Congress is free, within the broad parameters of reason, to recognize whatever rights it desires, to pronounce the infringement of those rights a form of domination and, hence, a manifestation of slavery, and to proscribe the infringement as a violation of the thirteenth amendment. Approached in this fashion, Congress would possess plenary power under the thirteenth amendment to shield all but the most insignificant rights from both governmental and private invasion.

Nevertheless, the Supreme Court has had no opportunity to consider whether *Jones* reaches as far as it indicates. Since the immediate post-Civil War era, Congress has passed scant legislation relying upon the thirteenth amendment for constitutional authorization. Because the Court's recent thirteenth amendment opinions involve the long-ignored post-Civil War statutes, such as the 1866 and 1870 Acts, which are concerned almost entirely with racial discrimination, they raise few issues as to the limits of Congress' thirteenth amendment power. Rather, as

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199 Id. at 440.
201 Id. at 332-33.
202 Id. at 333. Even if the Court overrules Runyon, *Jones* is still the law and the question of reconsidering it is not before the Court. 57 U.S.L.W. at 3293.
exemplified by Runyon and Patterson, the statutes create complex problems of construction considering the inherent difficulties of reconciling ambiguous century-old legislative history with modern notions of individual rights.205

Congressional power to enforce the fourteenth amendment has consistently given rise to even more pronounced constitutional controversy.206 This amendment recognizes several broad protections which the Supreme Court has never defined with precision.207 Because the fourteenth amendment is so amenable to interpretation, it invites remedial congressional legislation and, like the thirteenth amendment, congressional determination of the very rights themselves.208

By their terms, the due process and the equal protection clauses of the fourteenth amendment affect only governmental actions.209 During the Reconstruction Era, the Supreme Court struck down much civil rights legislation on the ground that it regulated the conduct of private individuals in addition to state action. The legislation was not authorized by the fourteenth amendment and was therefore unconstitutional.210 In the 1960's when the Court undertook to re-examine the reach of congressional power under the fourteenth amendment, a key issue was whether, under a new theory of congressional power, Congress could subject private actions to fourteenth amendment restrictions.211

In two decisions, the Supreme Court intimated that Congress has the authority to regulate at least some private conduct under the fourteenth amendment.212 Although the Court has recently had no occasion to consider the limits of the state action requirement on congressional power to enforce the fourteenth amendment, it seems fairly clear that congressional power exists to reach private conduct.213 Congress could reasonably adopt the view that the states have an affirmative obligation to regulate certain forms of private conduct and that, where the states fail or refuse to do so, Congress could impose its own regulation under the fourteenth amendment.214

205 Id.
206 Id. at 340.
207 These include, of course, due process and equal protection. U.S. Const. amend. XIV, § 1.
208 L. Tribe, supra note 195, at 340.
209 Id. at 350-51.
210 The Civil Rights Cases, 109 U.S. 3 (1883); United States v. Harris, 106 U.S. 629 (1883).
211 L. Tribe, supra note 195, at 351.
213 Great Am. Fed. Sav. & Loan Ass'n v. Novotny, 442 U.S. 366 (1979) (certain rights guaranteed by fourteenth amendment were protected against interference by private action).
The standard for judicial review of the regulation adopted by Congress to eradicate the badges and incidents of slavery is given by the thirteenth amendment itself: appropriateness. The Supreme Court appears to treat this standard as one of minimum rationality, similar to the rational basis test enunciated in *McCulloch v. Maryland*. However, when the means adopted include racial classification, a higher level of scrutiny is required. Because of the historic relationship between the thirteenth amendment and race, and because the fourteenth amendment was intended to expand, not contract, congressional power, the stricter standard of review should be developed from the nature of the thirteenth amendment.

The thirteenth amendment makes the elimination of a badge or incident of slavery per se a compelling state interest. Congressional action under this amendment aims at the elimination of a general, pervasive, and historical discrimination resulting from slavery; accordingly, Congress can attack discrimination in any number of ways, including the enactment of Section 1981 and its predecessors. The contract rights protected by Section 1981 would therefore derive from the thirteenth amendment, not from an implied or express provision in a private agreement between two parties.

Traditionally, the tests developed by the Court in the determination of state action focused on whether sufficient state connections to a particular activity do, or do not, exist. However, the fourteenth amendment does not require the judiciary to determine whether a state has acted, but whether a state has deprived someone of a guaranteed right. In many instances, the state has acted to establish a priority between two conflicting private rights by legalizing or, at least, not outlawing a challenged practice in the state. If the value of a right protected by the fourteenth amendment clearly outweighs the value of the challenged practice, the amendment proscribes the practice and the state has deprived the plaintiff of a guaranteed right by its failure to shield the right from the impact of the practice.

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216 4 Wheat. 316, 421 (1819).
217 450 F. Supp. at 365.
219 450 F. Supp. at 365.
220 Id.
221 Id.
224 Id. at 449.
225 Id.
226 Id.
Utilizing this approach, it may be argued that Section 1981 reaches private acts of racial discrimination even if the Court overrules Runyon and declares Section 1981 a fourteenth amendment statute requiring state action. The right to be free from employment-related racial discrimination, with its catastrophic economic and social consequences, surely outweighs the important but less relevant rights to association and of privacy.

**B. Stare Decisis**

The doctrine of stare decisis—adherence to decided cases—formed a fundamental basis for the majority and concurring opinions in Runyon. Stare decisis counsels even more strongly now than it did thirteen years ago against overturning this crucial statutory precedent. If Runyon were to be overruled, it would demonstrate that “stare decisis seemingly operates with the randomness of a lightning bolt: on occasion it may strike, but when and where can be known only after the fact.”

While it is true that a single decision has never been considered absolutely binding in all events, nothing less than an overriding conviction that a precept established by an earlier decision contradicted the principles of the law so that it had an adverse effect upon the process of determining new questions by analogical reasoning and produced flatly unjust results, could justify judicial rejection. For stare decisis to be discarded, there must be special justification, because only the most compelling circumstances can vindicate abandonment by the Supreme Court of firmly established statutory precedent.

Whether or not Runyon was correctly decided, given the complicated

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227 Another approach is the severability of Section 1981’s contract clause from its equal benefits clause and like punishment clause. The right to make and enforce contracts can be infringed by private individuals and it is proper that they be held liable. Conversely, the other clauses of Section 1981 concern the state, which is the sole source of law, so governmental action would be necessary. Mahone v. Waddle, 564 F.2d 1018, 1029-30 (3rd Cir. 1977), cert. denied, 438 U.S. 904 (1978).

228 Runyon held that certain personal choices that are not part of a commercial relationship that is offered generally or widely were not intended to be within the scope of the statute. 427 U.S. at 187 (Powell, J., concurring). Thus, minority nonshareholder employees who alleged discrimination by their employer stated a valid claim under Section 1981. Bonilla v. Oakland Scavenger Co., 697 F.2d 1297 (9th Cir. 1982), cert. denied, 467 U.S. 1251 (1984). By their very nature, employment situations are less personal and more likely to be offered to the general public than those involving private schools and clubs. See generally Dugan, Civil Rights and Freedom of Contract: Employment, Housing and Credit Transactions (Part I—Employment), 26 S.D.L. REV. 259 (1981); Note, Section 1981 and Private Groups: The Right to Discriminate Versus Freedom from Discrimination, 84 YALE L.J. 1441 (1975).

229 427 U.S. at 168-70, 186, and 190-91.


233 Id.

and even ambiguous legislative history of Section 1981, it did not hamper
subsequent legal reasoning,235 nor did it effect "flatly unjust" results. Runyon's
acknowledgement of a constitutional and statutory right to be free from private
racial discrimination can hardly be termed unjust.236

If the Supreme Court, upon reconsideration, were to rule that Section
1981 is a fourteenth amendment statute requiring state action and there-
fore does not reach private acts of discrimination, it would not rectify an
error so egregious as it has in other cases.237 The circumstances of any
error in Runyon are not the most compelling. Rather, the Court's inter-
pretation of Section 1981 and other federal civil rights legislation is an
area that has received "careful, intense and sustained congressional atten-
tion."238

The criteria for gaging compelling circumstances are provided in Run-
yon itself:

[WHen a rule, after it has been duly tested by experience, has been
found to be inconsistent with the sense of justice or with the
social welfare, there should be less hesitation in frank
avowal and full abandonment . . . If judges have woefully mis-
interpreted the mores of their day, or if the mores of their day
are no longer those of ours, they ought not to tie, in helpless
submission, the hands of their successors.239

In the exceptional case, those admonitions favor departure from precedent
and allow the Court the flexibility to confront significant developments
as needed. However, the policy of the nation as formulated by Congress
in recent years has consistently promoted the elimination of racial dis-
crimination in all sectors of society.240 Patterson is not an exceptional
case, and adherence to Runyon is favored.

Judicial adherence to precedent furthers certain values in decision-
making: consistency, coherence, fairness, equality, predictability, and ef-
ficiency.241 At its most basic level, stare decisis encourages systemwide
stability and continunity by ensuring the survival of governmental norms
which have achieved unsurpassed importance in American life.242 One
such norm is the freedom from racial discrimination. Both tangible and
symbolic expectations have materialized around critical Court decisions,
Runyon included; the massive destabilization resulting from a successful
attack on this or other norms would endanger the functioning of the
federal government, if not the viability of the constitutional order itself.243

235 See supra Part III.B., for a discussion of reliance on Runyon.
equal" doctrine).
238 Square D Co. v. Niagara Frontier Tariff Bureau, Inc., 476 U.S. 409, 424
(1986).
239 427 U.S. at 191, quoting B. CARDozo, supra note 154, at 150-52.
240 427 U.S. at 191.
241 Monaghan, supra note 231, at 749.
242 Id.
243 Id. at 750.
Advocates who urge that the Supreme Court overrule Runyon present two arguments. The first concerns forced contracting. Stripped of all rhetoric, Runyon held that members of racial or other protected classes may coerce private individuals into contractual arrangements they do not wish to enter.\(^\text{244}\) Although the principle that contracts are private and presuppose mutually assenting parties is not sacrosanct, it deserves substantive consideration before being discarded and replaced by the determination in Runyon that a public policy of nondiscrimination necessitates intrusive restraints on private conduct.\(^\text{245}\) The feared "inevitable result" of such a sweeping application of Runyon is that "there will be a section 1981 action in federal court whenever a white man strikes a black man in a barroom brawl."\(^\text{246}\)

The second argument advanced by opponents of Runyon is that the decision permits plaintiffs to circumvent the comprehensive federal statutory scheme created by Congress in recent years to fight racial discrimination. Congress struck a reasonable and widely accepted balance between contractual freedom and antidiscrimination policy in Title VII and other similar laws.\(^\text{247}\) Scores of plaintiffs have brought Section 1981 suits to redress acts of discrimination covered by Title VII, or appended Section 1981 claims to Title VII complaints, because the potential remedies can make it worth their while.\(^\text{248}\)

The punitive damages awarded in these cases can amount to several times the compensatory damages.\(^\text{249}\) Some plaintiffs have collected for mental distress; others have won back pay awards above the limits authorized by Title VII.\(^\text{250}\) Were Section 1981 to become an integral part of the tort litigation explosion, it would not be an instrument of a coherent civil rights policy but "an entry ticket to a lottery with windfall settlements or judgments."\(^\text{251}\) The costs could be considerable both to the American free enterprise system and to minorities who would not be hired because prospective employers and contractors fear the expensive liability posed by a Section 1981 lawsuit.\(^\text{252}\)

Supporters of Runyon emphasize the important policy goals the opinion serves because Section 1981 covers things which Title VII does not.\(^\text{253}\) It reaches small employers, provides for punitive and compensatory damages, grants the right to a trial by jury, and offers a longer statute of

\(^{244}\) Overrule Runyon?, supra note 230, at 38.
\(^{245}\) Id.
\(^{247}\) For example, Congress excluded employers with less than 15 employees from Title VII, but made it easier to prove discrimination under Title VII than Section 1981. Overrule Runyon?, supra note 230, at 38.
\(^{248}\) Id.
\(^{249}\) Id.
\(^{250}\) Id.
\(^{251}\) Id.
\(^{253}\) Reidinger, supra note 10, at 81.
limitations and immediate access to the courts. 254

Section 1981, as interpreted by the Court in *Runyon* and its progeny, protects groups which are racially “identifiable” 255 and hence, more vulnerable to bigotry than whites. Employment discrimination robs these groups of billions of dollars annually. 256 “It robs the American economy, holds down the gross national product (GNP), and further reduces the maximum utilization of goods and services of Americans. The continuation of these insidious practices further compounds the poverty cycle and adds millions of poor blacks and whites to welfare rolls.” 257

Prior to 1941, employment opportunities for blacks in particular were difficult, if not impossible, to obtain. 258 Many blacks were employed in the very lowest level jobs and remained there without promotion until retirement. 259 The years following World War II witnessed the passage of a plethora of executive orders, civil rights acts and related laws, and the judicial strengthening of Reconstruction Era legislation, including Section 1981. 260 Until last April, the Supreme Court continually endorsed *Runyon*’s interpretation that Section 1981 reaches private conduct, and Congress has not reconsidered its position on this matter. 261

The Court’s unilateral decision to reconsider *Runyon* surely undermines the faith of victims of racial discrimination in a stable construction of civil rights laws, and harms the public’s perception of the Court as an impartial adjudicator of cases and controversies. 262 Time alone will tell whether the Court’s actions will return discriminatees to their pre-1941 status and chart a course for national civil rights policy back to the future.

VI. CONCLUSION

The recent controversial announcement by the Supreme Court that it would reconsider its holding in *Runyon v. McCrary* has called into question an area of law thought well-settled. *Runyon* held that 42 U.S.C. Section 1981 reaches private acts of discrimination against blacks and other racially identifiable groups. Courts subsequently relied on *Runyon* to define the origin and application of Section 1981 to employment discrimination claims and its complementary relation to Title VII.

The constitutional and legal issues of state action and stare decisis are implicated by the Court’s announcement, and suggest that, Section 1981’s ambiguous legislative history notwithstanding, *Runyon* should be upheld. Reversal of the decision could ultimately impair the status of minorities, undermine confidence in the Court, and spell disaster for the American ideal of equal employment opportunity for all.

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254 Id. See also Part II.C. and D. supra.
257 Id.
258 Id. at 28.
259 Id.
260 See id., ch. II.
261 Patterson, 485 U.S. at 617.
262 Id.