

No. _____

**In The
Supreme Court of the United States**

—◆—
COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES,

Petitioner,

vs.

ASSOCIATION FOR LOS ANGELES
DEPUTY SHERIFFS, LISA BROWN DEBS,
and SEAN O'DONOGHUE,

Respondents.

—◆—
**On Petition For Writ Of Certiorari
To The United States Court Of Appeals
For The Ninth Circuit**

—◆—
PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI

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QUESTIONS PRESENTED

In *Board of Regents v. Roth*, 408 U.S. 564, 577-78 (1972), this Court held that the scope of a public employee's constitutionally protected property interest in his or her job is defined by the terms of the employment under federal, state or local law.

In *Gilbert v. Homar*, 520 U.S. 924, 932 (1997), this Court held further that police officers who are suspended while felony charges are pending against them are not constitutionally entitled to receive pay during the suspension, because "the government does not have to give an employee charged with a felony a paid leave at taxpayer expense," and "if [the officer's] services to the government are no longer useful once the felony charge has been filed, the Constitution does not require the government to bear the added expense of hiring a replacement while still paying him."

The questions presented are:

1. Under the Constitution, does a public entity have the right to define the terms of a law enforcement officer's employment so that when the officer is charged with a felony, the entity may suspend the officer without pay pending resolution of the criminal charge?

2. If a public entity suspends a law enforcement officer based on a pending felony charge and the officer later disproves the allegations underlying the charge, does the Constitution require the public

QUESTIONS PRESENTED – Continued

entity to pay backpay for the suspension, even though terms of the officer's employment do not entitle the officer to such pay?

**PARTIES TO THE PROCEEDING
AND RULE 29.6 STATEMENT**

The parties to the proceeding in the Ninth Circuit, whose judgment is sought to be reviewed, are:

- Association for Los Angeles Deputy Sheriffs, Lisa Brown Debs, and Sean O'Donoghue, plaintiffs, appellants below, and respondents here.
- County of Los Angeles, defendant, appellee below, and petitioner here.

Darrin Wilkinson and David Sherr were plaintiffs in the underlying action and appellants below, but are not parties to this petition.

Gloria Molina, Yvonne Brathwaite Burke, Zev Yaroslavsky, Don Knabe, Michael D. Antonovich, Lynn Adkins, Vange Felton, Carol Fox, Z. Greg Kahwajian, Evelyn Martinez, and Leroy Baca were defendants in the underlying action and appellees below, but are not parties to this petition.

No corporations are involved in this proceeding.

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The Ninth Circuit's opinion filed August 12, 2011, the subject of this petition, is reported at 648 F.3d 986 (9th Cir. 2011). (Appendix ["App."]1-31.) The Ninth Circuit's October 17, 2011 order denying rehearing and rehearing en banc was not published in the official reports. (App.43-45.)

The district court's July 7, 2008 order granting defendant and petitioner's motion to dismiss was not published in the official reports. (App.32-42.)



JURISDICTION

The Ninth Circuit filed its opinion on August 12, 2011. (App.1-31.) Petitioner timely petitioned for rehearing and rehearing en banc, and on October 17, 2011, the Ninth Circuit denied the petition. (App.43-45.) This Court has jurisdiction under 28 U.S.C. §1254(1) to review on writ of certiorari the Ninth Circuit's August 12, 2011 decision.



CONSTITUTIONAL AND STATUTORY PROVISIONS AT ISSUE

Respondents brought the underlying action under 42 U.S.C. §1983, which states:

Every person who, under color of any statute, ordinance, regulation, custom, or usage, of any State or Territory or the District of

Columbia, subjects, or causes to be subjected, any citizen of the United States or other person within the jurisdiction thereof to the deprivation of any rights, privileges, or immunities secured by the Constitution and laws, shall be liable to the party injured in an action at law, suit in equity, or other proper proceeding for redress, except that in any action brought against a judicial officer for an act or omission taken in such officer's judicial capacity, injunctive relief shall not be granted unless a declaratory decree was violated or declaratory relief was unavailable. For the purposes of this section, any Act of Congress applicable exclusively to the District of Columbia shall be considered to be a statute of the District of Columbia.

Respondents allege that petitioner violated their rights under the United States Constitution's Fourteenth Amendment, Section 1, which provides:

All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the State wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.



STATEMENT OF THE CASE

A. Sheriff's Deputies Debs and O'Donoghue Are Suspended without Pay after Being Charged with Felonies.

Lisa Brown Debs and Sean O'Donoghue are Los Angeles County deputy sheriffs who were charged with felonies. (App.3-4.) Debs was charged on June 27, 2004, with felony drunk driving. (App.4.) O'Donoghue was charged on June 3, 2002, with seven felony counts, including two counts of falsifying a police report, three counts of accessory after the fact to possession of narcotics for sale, one count of perjury, and one count of false imprisonment. (App.4.)

The Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (the "Sheriff's Department") served Debs and O'Donoghue with letters of intent to suspend them. (App.4.) The deputies responded in writing and denied the allegations against them, but were nonetheless suspended without pay. (App.4.) The deputies then requested post-suspension hearings before the Los Angeles County Civil Service Commission (the "Commission"). (App.4.) The requests were held in abeyance pending completion of the criminal proceedings and disciplinary action by the Sheriff's Department. (App.4.)

On August 13, 2004, the district attorney dismissed the felony charge against Debs, and Debs pleaded no contest to a misdemeanor drunk driving

charge. (App.4, 33 n.2; ER 19.)¹ A jury acquitted O'Donoghue on January 28, 2003. (App.4, 33 n.3; ER 22.) Following these events, the deputies were reinstated from their suspensions and returned to paid status. (App.4-5.) They continued to demand hearings before the Commission to contest the propriety of their suspensions after the fact. (App.5.)

After their reinstatement from suspension, and before any post-suspension hearings were held, the Sheriff's Department discharged Debs and O'Donoghue, based partly on the allegations underlying the criminal charges.² (App.5.) The deputies requested hearings on their discharges, and these hearings were consolidated with the pending post-suspension hearings. (App.5.)

B. After Post-Suspension Hearings, the Deputies Do Not Receive Backpay for the Suspensions.

Debs and O'Donoghue eventually received post-suspension hearings. (App.6.) The Commission's hearing officer found that Debs's suspension and discharge were improper because the allegations

¹ "ER" refers to the Appellants' Excerpts of Record.

² Debs was suspended for approximately three weeks. (App.5 n.2.) She was reinstated on August 17, 2004, and discharged on March 10, 2005. (App.5 n.3.) O'Donoghue was suspended for approximately nine months; he was reinstated on February 28, 2003 and discharged on June 9, 2005. (App.5 nn.2-3.)

underlying the felony charge against her were untrue. (App.6.) The hearing officer recommended that the Commission reinstate Debs from her discharge and restore the pay lost during her suspension. (App.6.) After hearing this recommendation, the Commission ordered Debs reinstated from her discharge, but denied Debs backpay for the time she was suspended. (App.6.) The Commission held that Debs's suspension was proper because a felony charge, whether or not supported by valid allegations, was pending against her when the Sheriff's Department imposed her suspension. (App.6.)

As to O'Donoghue, the hearing officer recommended that O'Donoghue be reinstated with backpay to the date of his discharge, and that he receive backpay and benefits for the time he was suspended. (App.6.) After hearing the recommendation, the Commission ordered O'Donoghue reinstated from his discharge. (App.6.) The Commission did not reverse the suspension, but directed the Los Angeles County Sheriff, the Sheriff's Department, and the County of Los Angeles (the "County") to reconsider the decision to suspend O'Donoghue. (App.6.) They did not do so, and O'Donoghue was not reimbursed for his lost pay and benefits for the time he was suspended. (App.6-7.)

C. Plaintiffs Sue the County, and the District Court Grants the County's Motion to Dismiss.

Debs and O'Donoghue, joined by their union, the Association of Los Angeles Deputy Sheriffs (collectively,

“plaintiffs”) sued the County and numerous government officials in federal district court.³ (App.1, 7, 34.) Plaintiffs brought claims under 42 U.S.C. §1983, alleging violations of their Fourteenth Amendment due process rights. (App.7.)

The operative complaint alleged that Debs and O’Donoghue could be suspended or discharged only for misconduct, and thus held property interests in their employment entitled to due process protection. (ER 31, 35.) They alleged that they were deprived of these interests, in that they failed to receive meaningful post-suspension hearings in which to contest the validity of the charges on which the suspensions were based and thereby recover the pay and benefits lost during the suspension. (ER 32, 36.) The complaint further alleged that the County had a policy or custom of sustaining suspensions without pay based solely on the fact that felony charges had been filed, rather than requiring proof that the charges were actually true, and that this policy caused the deprivation of the deputies’ due process rights. (ER 40-41.)

The County moved to dismiss. (App.7.) The district court granted the motion, holding that

³ Plaintiffs also sued various branches of the County, including the Commission and the Sheriff’s Department, erroneously under separate names. (See ER 85; App.1.)

plaintiffs had failed to state a claim against the County.⁴ (App.7, 36-42.) Plaintiffs appealed. (App.7.)

D. The Ninth Circuit Holds That Plaintiffs Have Sufficiently Pled a Claim against the County Based on a Violation of Their Procedural Due Process Rights.

As to the County, the Ninth Circuit reversed in a 2-1 decision.⁵ The majority, Judges Pregerson and Nelson, held that plaintiffs' allegations sufficiently pleaded a claim against the County under *Monell v. Department of Social Services*, 436 U.S. 658 (1978). (App.3-16, 21.)

First, the majority noted that plaintiffs had alleged that the County's policy was to sustain suspensions, after post-suspension review, so long as there was evidence that a felony charge had been filed against the deputy, regardless of the validity of the allegations stated in the charge. (App.13.) The majority concluded that the County had actually applied this policy to Debs and O'Donoghue because, although the hearing officers recommended that these deputies receive backpay for their suspensions, the Commission nonetheless rejected the recommendation

⁴ The district court held that the individual defendants were entitled to qualified immunity. (App.7, 39-41.)

⁵ The Ninth Circuit affirmed the grant of qualified immunity to the individual defendants on Debs's and O'Donoghue's claims. (App.23-24.)

to reverse Debs's suspension, and as to O'Donoghue, although the Commission recommended reconsideration of the suspension, the County and the Sheriff failed to do so. (App.13.)

Second, the majority held that plaintiffs had thereby alleged a constitutional violation. (App.14-15.) The court reasoned that under *Cleveland Board of Education v. Loudermill*, 470 U.S. 532, 538 (1985), the deputies had a constitutionally protected property interest in continued employment, of which they could not be deprived without due process of law, and that the suspensions deprived them of that interest. (App.8.) The majority then held that plaintiffs had sufficiently alleged that the post-suspension procedures provided to the deputies failed to satisfy due process:

Making every inference in favor of Plaintiffs, as we must at the pleading stage, we conclude that Plaintiffs could conceivably prove facts to support their allegation that Defendants' policy caused a violation of Plaintiffs' right to due process. For example, Plaintiffs could show that [under the balancing test from *Mathews v. Eldridge*, 424 U.S. 319, 335 (1976),] the limited post-suspension inquiry created too great a risk of erroneous deprivation of their protected interest in employment, or that Defendants' interest in maintaining such limited procedures does not outweigh Plaintiffs' interest in a more thorough investigation.

(App.15.)

The majority stated that it was not deciding categorically whether due process required a post-suspension hearing to look beyond whether a felony charge had been filed, but was remanding for further factual development:

We need not and do not decide whether, in all cases, a post-suspension hearing that looks no deeper than whether felony charges were filed against an employee would or would not pass constitutional muster. Indeed, full *Mathews* analysis cannot properly be conducted at the pleading stage with an undeveloped record. . . . It is possible that Defendants' post-suspension hearings are more robust than Plaintiffs allege, or that Defendants' [*sic*] have a strong justification for their challenged policy. We leave it to the district court to make these determinations in the first instance, with *Mathews* as its guide, and therefore remand for further fact-finding and analysis.

(App.15-16.)⁶

The court also declined to decide whether Debs and O'Donoghue were entitled to backpay, but stated that should the issue arise, the district court should resolve it in the first instance. (App.19 n.10.)

⁶ In discussing whether the individual defendants were entitled to qualified immunity, the majority noted that it was "an unresolved question whether due process is satisfied by a post-suspension hearing that sustains a suspension based solely on the fact of a pending criminal proceeding." (App.23.)

E. Judge Ikuta Dissents, Finding That under the Deputies' Employment Terms and This Court's Decisions in *Board of Regents v. Roth* and *Gilbert v. Homar*, the Deputies Could Be Suspended without Pay Based Solely on a Felony Charge.

In dissent, Judge Ikuta concluded that plaintiffs had *not* alleged a plausible violation of their due process rights. (App.25.) Rather, Debs and O'Donoghue had "received all the process that was due" by way of post-suspension hearings and reinstatement, even though the Commission denied backpay on the ground that the pending felony charges justified the suspensions. (App.25.) As Judge Ikuta explained, "a Los Angeles County deputy sheriff's property interest in continued employment does not extend to being paid while a felony charge is pending against him or her, regardless of whether the employee committed the misconduct that formed the basis of the felony charge." (App.28-29.)

First, Judge Ikuta reasoned that under *Board of Regents v. Roth*, 408 U.S. 564, 577-78 (1972), the scope of the deputies' protected property interest in their jobs depended on the terms of their employment, and those terms allowed them to be suspended without pay based solely on a felony charge. (App.27.) Specifically, Rule 18.031 of the Los Angeles County Civil Service Rules allowed the Sheriff's Department to suspend deputies based on "any behavior or condition which impairs an employee's qualifications for his or her position or for continued county

employment,'” and “the pendency of a felony charge unquestionably ‘impairs’ a deputy sheriff’s ‘qualifications’ for employment as a law enforcement officer.” (App.27.)

Second, Judge Ikuta noted that in *Gilbert v. Homar*, 520 U.S. 924 (1997), this Court

confirmed that a suspension without pay while a felony charge is pending does not deprive a law enforcement employee of any constitutionally protected property interest. [Citation.] The government is not obliged to “give an employee charged with a felony a paid leave at taxpayer expense.” *See* [*Gilbert*, 520 U.S. at 932]. In other words, if a law enforcement employee’s “services to the government are no longer useful once the felony charge has been filed, the Constitution does not require the government to bear the added expense of hiring a replacement while still paying him.” *Id.*

(App.28.) For the same reason, Judge Ikuta reasoned, the government need not pay backpay for the suspension period after the fact. (App.28 n.2.)

Judge Ikuta commented that plaintiffs’ claims did not raise a due process issue at all, because the deputies “[did] not challenge the Commission’s procedures, but rather the substantive standard the Commission applied to them, that is, they object[ed] to the Commission’s determination that they could be validly suspended simply because felony charges had been filed against them.” (App.25, 29-30.)

The County petitioned for rehearing. (Defendants' Petition for Rehearing, 9th Cir. docket #49, filed 9/2/11.) Among other things, the County argued that the majority's decision would effectively require all public employers to provide employees with paid vacations while the employee faces criminal charges and cannot serve the public. (*Id.* at 1.)

The Ninth Circuit denied the petition for rehearing on October 17, 2011. (App.43-45.) Judge Ikuta voted to grant rehearing and rehearing en banc. (App.44.)



REASONS TO GRANT THE PETITION

The Fourteenth Amendment's Due Process Clause prohibits deprivations of property interests without due process of law. Yet, this Court has held that to have a property interest entitled to due process protection, an individual must be able to identify an independent source, such as state law or the terms of the individual's employment, that gives him or her "a legitimate claim of entitlement" to a particular benefit. *Board of Regents v. Roth*, 408 U.S. 564, 577 (1972). Accordingly, the scope of a public employee's constitutionally protected property interest in his or her job is defined by the terms of the employment under federal, state or local law. *See id.* at 577-78.

In *Gilbert v. Homar*, 520 U.S. 924 (1997), the Court made clear that although public employees who can be discharged only for cause have property

interests in their continued employment, those property interests do not extend to give law enforcement officers a right to be paid when they are suspended while felony charges are pending against them. In holding that a police officer suspended with felony charges pending was not entitled to pay during his suspension, the Court stated:

[T]he government does not have to give an employee charged with a felony a paid leave at taxpayer expense. If his services to the government are no longer useful once the felony charge has been filed, the Constitution does not require the government to bear the added expense of hiring a replacement while still paying him.

Id. at 932.

Since *Roth* and *Gilbert*, it has been settled law that as far as the Constitution is concerned, public entities have an absolute right to define the terms of employment for law enforcement officers so as to suspend the officers without pay while the officers face felony charges. Similarly, it has been clear that if such an officer is suspended with felony charges pending and the officer is eventually reinstated or acquitted, or the felony charge dismissed, the public entity need not pay backpay for the suspension.

Yet the Ninth Circuit, in a 2-1 decision, has turned this expectation on its head. Here, plaintiffs, County Sheriff's deputies, alleged that they were suspended without pay while felony charges were

pending against them, and were later exonerated of the charges. They claimed that the County violated their due process rights by failing to give them a post-suspension hearing in which they could challenge the truth of the allegations underlying the felony charges and thus establish that they were entitled to backpay for the suspension period. As the dissent noted, the deputies' terms of employment provided that they could be suspended while felony charges were pending, and nothing in their employment terms or state law entitled them to be paid during the suspension or receive backpay after the fact.

Nonetheless, the Ninth Circuit majority, Judges Pregerson and Nelson, held that because the deputies were public employees who could be discharged only for cause, they had property interests in their continued employment that might entitle them to a post-suspension hearing at which they could challenge not only whether the felony charges were in fact filed, but whether the underlying allegations were true. The majority further allowed the district court to determine whether the deputies were entitled to backpay for the suspensions.

As the dissent noted, this holding was unsupported by the terms of the deputies' employment – which, under *Roth*, should have been dispositive – and flatly contravened *Gilbert's* express statement that a law enforcement officer charged with a felony has no constitutional right to a paid leave at taxpayer expense, and the Constitution does not require the

government also to pay a replacement while the officer is suspended.

In effect, the majority created a new substantive right under the Constitution's Due Process Clause, entitling law enforcement officers to be paid while suspended for pending felony charges if they can disprove the allegations underlying the charges. The majority denied that it was creating such a right, asserting that it was not deciding whether, to satisfy due process, a post-suspension hearing must always inquire beyond whether felony charges were actually filed. The majority also remanded to the district court for factual development on issues such as whether the County's post-suspension hearings were in fact limited to determining whether felony charges were filed, or whether the County had a strong justification for such limited hearings. But by remanding for factual development on issues other than the filing of felony charges against the officers, the majority effectively determined that felony charges alone could not justify an unpaid suspension even if the terms of employment specifically provided for such a suspension.

As a result, despite this Court's clear mandate in *Roth* and *Gilbert*, it is no longer settled that the government has a right, pursuant to a law enforcement officer's terms of employment, to suspend the officer without pay while felony charges are pending against him or her.

The impact of the Ninth Circuit's decision is enormous, affecting every law enforcement agency within the Ninth Circuit, and indeed unsettling the law with respect to basic law-enforcement employment practices across the country. It is, unfortunately, not rare for police officers to be charged with felonies. As the Court recognized in *Roth* and *Gilbert*, it is essential that law enforcement agencies have the power to define the terms of employment so as to have the power to discipline such officers and take appropriate measures to preserve the integrity of the police force. It is vital that law enforcement agencies know that they can suspend officers whose services are at least temporarily unavailable due to the filing of felony charges, without being forced to give those officers "a paid leave at taxpayer expense" or to incur the substantial double expense of paying both the officer and a replacement during the suspension. *Gilbert*, 520 U.S. at 932. Absent such certainty, agencies may refrain from suspending officers charged with felonies, thus eroding public confidence in law enforcement. Alternatively, the public will be required to bear the extraordinary expense of paying officers who are not providing services. This Hobson's choice forced upon law enforcement agencies and government entities by the Ninth Circuit's decision represents a gross intrusion into the day-to-day operation of fundamental public safety services, under the guise of amorphous principles of "due process."

Moreover, the damaging impact of the Ninth Circuit's decision is not limited solely to discipline of law enforcement personnel. It impairs the ability of petitioner County to make basic managerial decisions as to its over 100,000 employees,⁷ and improperly constrains the authority of government employers throughout the Ninth Circuit to deal with more than two million public employees.⁸ The ability of public employers to protect governmental integrity by suspending the broad spectrum of public employees without pay, pending disposition of criminal charges that go squarely to the public's confidence in public employees' ability to perform their jobs in an honest manner, is directly compromised by the Ninth Circuit's repudiation of *Roth* and its suggestion that open-ended principles of due process may substitute for precise terms of employment conferred by the public entity. The confusion sown by the Ninth Circuit's decision with respect to both law enforcement officers in particular and public employees in general mandates review by this Court.

⁷ See <http://lacounty.gov/wps/portal/lac/employees/> (last visited Jan. 12, 2012).

⁸ Statistics available from United States Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov/govs/apes/> (last visited Jan. 12, 2012).

I. THIS COURT HAS ESTABLISHED THAT A PROPERTY INTEREST ENTITLED TO DUE PROCESS PROTECTION MUST BE BASED ON AN INDEPENDENT SOURCE SUCH AS STATE LAW, AND THAT A POLICE OFFICER WHO CAN BE DISCHARGED ONLY FOR CAUSE DOES NOT AUTOMATICALLY HAVE A PROPERTY INTEREST IN BEING PAID FOR A SUSPENSION IMPOSED WHILE THE OFFICER FACES FELONY CHARGES.

In a series of cases, this Court has established that absent a provision of state or local law to the contrary, a public entity has an absolute right to suspend without pay a police officer who is charged with a felony, and accordingly, the public entity need not provide backpay for the suspension period if the officer is later exonerated.

In *Board of Regents v. Roth*, 408 U.S. 564 (1972), the Court made clear that to have a property interest entitled to due process protection, a plaintiff must identify a specific provision of state law or a similar source that supports such an interest. There, plaintiff was hired as an assistant professor at a state university for a one-year term, but was not rehired for the following year. *Id.* at 566. He was given no reason for the decision and no opportunity to challenge it at a hearing. *Id.* at 568. Plaintiff had no tenure rights, and under state law, a non-tenured teacher was entitled to nothing beyond his one-year appointment. *Id.* at 566. Nor were there any statutory

or administrative standards defining eligibility for reemployment; rather, state law left the decision whether to rehire a non-tenured teacher to university officials' unfettered discretion. *Id.* at 567. The university's rules also provided no protection for a non-tenured teacher who was simply not rehired for the next year. *Id.* Nevertheless, plaintiff sued, alleging that the university's failure to give him reasons for his nonretention and an opportunity for a hearing violated his right to procedural due process of law under the Fourteenth Amendment. *Id.* at 568-69.

This Court held that plaintiff had no constitutional right to a statement of reasons or a hearing. *Id.* at 569. The Court noted that "[t]he requirements of procedural due process apply only to the deprivation of interests encompassed by the Fourteenth Amendment's protection of liberty and property." *Id.* The Court found that the university's refusal to rehire plaintiff implicated no liberty or property interest entitled to due process protection. *Id.* at 573-75, 578.

In finding that plaintiff was not deprived of a property interest, the Court noted that the Fourteenth Amendment's protection of "property" safeguards "interests that a person has already acquired in specific benefits." *Id.* at 576. The Court noted that such "[p]roperty interests . . . are not created by the Constitution," but "are created and . . . defined by existing rules or understandings that stem from an independent source such as state law – rules or understandings that secure certain benefits and that support claims of entitlement to those benefits." *Id.* at

577. The Court emphasized that to have a property interest in a benefit, a person must not simply want or expect that benefit, but “must . . . have a legitimate claim of entitlement to it.” *Id.*

The Court reasoned that any property interest in employment at the university “was created and defined by the terms of [plaintiff’s] appointment,” which secured his employment for one year but specifically provided for termination thereafter and did not provide for contract renewal on any terms. *Id.* at 578. Thus, plaintiff’s appointment terms “supported absolutely no possible claim of entitlement to re-employment” for a second year. *Id.* Nor was there any state statute or university rule that created any legitimate claim to re-employment. *Id.* Thus, plaintiff did not have a property interest that required the university to give him a hearing when it declined to renew his employment contract. *Id.*

In *Mathews v. Eldridge*, 424 U.S. 319 (1976), the Court set forth a test for determining what procedures would satisfy the requirement of due process of law in cases where the plaintiff has established a protected property interest. The issue before the Court was whether the Fifth Amendment’s due process clause required that prior to termination of Social Security disability benefit payments, the recipient have an opportunity for an evidentiary hearing. *Id.* at 323.

The Court determined that an individual’s interest in continued receipt of Social Security disability

benefits was a statutorily created property interest entitled to due process protection. *Id.* at 332. The Court then considered what process was required to deprive a recipient of that interest. *Id.*

The Court noted that “due process is flexible and calls for such procedural protections as the particular situation demands.” *Id.* at 334. The Court identified three factors to be used in determining what process would be required in a given situation: (1) “the private interest that will be affected by the official action”; (2) “the risk of an erroneous deprivation of such interest through the procedures used, and the probable value, if any, of additional or substitute procedural safeguards”; and (3) “the Government’s interest, including the function involved and the fiscal and administrative burdens that the additional or substitute procedural requirement would entail.” *Id.* at 335.

Applying these factors, the Court determined that due process did not require an evidentiary hearing before terminating plaintiff’s disability insurance benefits, and that the existing administrative procedures comported with due process. *Id.* at 349.

In *Cleveland Board of Education v. Loudermill*, 470 U.S. 532 (1985), the Court considered what process must be provided to a public employee who can be discharged only for cause. *Id.* at 535. There, a public entity discharged two employees – a security guard who had falsely stated on his job application

that he had never been convicted of a felony, and a bus mechanic who failed an eye examination – without providing pre-termination hearings. *Id.* at 535-37. The Court held that plaintiffs had property interests in continued employment, because a state statute provided that the employees were entitled to retain their positions “‘during good behavior and efficient service’” and could not be dismissed “‘except . . . for . . . misfeasance, malfeasance, or nonfeasance in office.’” *Id.* at 538-39.⁹

The Court noted that due process generally requires that an individual be given an opportunity for a hearing before being deprived of a property interest, but that in some situations a post-deprivation hearing will satisfy due process requirements. *Id.* at 542 & n.7. The Court then applied the *Mathews* factors to determine what process was due to plaintiffs, *id.* at 543-45, and concluded that a full evidentiary hearing was not required before terminating plaintiffs; rather, a tenured public employee dismissible only for cause is entitled to a limited hearing prior to his termination, to be followed by a more comprehensive post-termination hearing. *Id.* at 545-47.

⁹ In contrast, the Ninth Circuit has previously held that a city employee who was laid off had no constitutionally protected property interest in continued employment, where the city’s municipal code provided that the city could eliminate positions for economic reasons. *Allen v. City of Beverly Hills*, 911 F.2d 367, 370-71 (9th Cir. 1990).

In *Gilbert v. Homar*, 520 U.S. 924 (1997), the Court considered what procedures would constitute due process in the context of disciplinary action short of termination – specifically, an unpaid suspension of a police officer. There, plaintiff, a police officer at a state university, was arrested in a drug raid and charged with various drug-related felonies. *Id.* at 926-27. The university suspended him without pay pending an investigation into the charges. *Id.* at 927. Although the criminal charges were eventually dismissed, plaintiff’s suspension remained in effect while the university continued with its own investigation, and plaintiff was eventually demoted to the position of groundskeeper. *Id.* Plaintiff eventually had an opportunity to respond to the charges against him at a meeting with the university’s president, who then sustained the demotion. *Id.* at 928. Plaintiff sued university officials, contending that they violated his procedural due process rights by failing to give him notice and an opportunity to be heard before suspending him without pay. *Id.*

The Court noted that it had not previously decided whether due process protections extend to discipline of tenured public employees short of termination, but assumed without deciding that plaintiff’s suspension infringed a protected property interest. *Id.* at 929. Applying the *Mathews* factors, the Court then held that due process did not require the university to provide a pre-suspension hearing, but only a prompt post-suspension hearing. *Id.* at 932-35.

First, assessing the private interest at stake, the Court noted that unlike in the case of a termination, the income lost during a temporary suspension without pay is “relatively insubstantial” as long as the suspended employee receives a sufficiently prompt post-suspension hearing. *Id.* at 932.

Second, on the other side of the balance, the Court noted that the government “has a significant interest in immediately suspending, when felony charges are filed against them, employees who occupy positions of great public trust and high public visibility, such as police officers.” *Id.* Significantly, the Court rejected the officer’s argument that he was entitled to pay during the suspension. The Court explained:

[Plaintiff] contends that [the government’s] interest in maintaining public confidence could have been accommodated by suspending him *with* pay until he had a hearing. We think, however, that *the government does not have to give an employee charged with a felony a paid leave at taxpayer expense. If his services to the government are no longer useful once the felony charge has been filed, the Constitution does not require the government to bear the added expense of hiring a replacement while still paying him.*

Id. (first emphasis original; second emphasis added).

Finally, considering “the risk of erroneous deprivation and the likely value of any additional procedures,” the Court determined that the government “had no constitutional obligation to provide [the

officer] with a presuspension hearing.” *Id.* at 933. The Court reasoned that “the purpose of any presuspension hearing would be to assure that there are reasonable grounds to support the suspension without pay,” but “here that has already been assured by the arrest and the filing of charges.” *Id.* at 933-34 (emphasis omitted). The Court explained that “the arrest and formal charges imposed upon [plaintiff] ‘by an independent body demonstrat[e] that the suspension is not arbitrary.’” *Id.* at 934. Moreover, “the imposition of felony charges ‘itself is an objective fact that will in most cases raise serious public concern.’” *Id.*¹⁰

The Court further noted that when an employee is suspended, a short delay before a hearing on the suspension “actually benefits the employee by allowing state officials to obtain more accurate information about the arrest and charges.” *Id.* at 934-35. If the government is forced to act too quickly in providing a hearing, “the decisionmaker ‘may give greater weight to the public interest and leave the suspension in place.’” *Id.* at 935.

¹⁰ Circuit courts have further noted that “acquittal of a criminal charge does not lead inexorably to the conclusion that an adverse personnel action was unjustified or unwarranted,” given “the different standards of proof prevailing in criminal prosecutions and adverse personnel actions.” *Jankowitz v. United States*, 533 F.2d 538, 542 (Ct. Cl. 1976); *Polcover v. Secretary of Treasury*, 477 F.2d 1223, 1231 (D.C. Cir. 1973) (similar reasoning).

The Court noted that once the charges against plaintiff were dropped, “the risk of erroneous deprivation increased,” and “there was likely value in holding a prompt hearing.” *Id.* The Court remanded the case for consideration of whether plaintiff received an adequately prompt post-suspension hearing. *Id.* at 935-36.

In short, these cases make clear that to establish a property interest entitled to due process protection, state law or some other source must specifically create an entitlement to a particular benefit – so that the scope of a public employee’s protected property interest in his or her job depends on the terms of the employment. Moreover, although a tenured public employee who can be discharged only for cause has a property interest in his or her continued employment, that property interest does not extend to being paid for a period of suspension imposed when a police officer is arrested and charged with a felony.

II. THIS COURT’S PRECEDENTS ESTABLISH THAT THE OFFICERS HERE RECEIVED PROCEDURAL DUE PROCESS IN THE FORM OF A POST-SUSPENSION HEARING ON WHETHER FELONY CHARGES WERE FILED AND HAD NO RIGHT TO RECEIVE BACKPAY FOR THEIR SUSPENSIONS.

As the dissent reasoned, this Court’s pronouncements make clear that Debs and O’Donoghue received adequate post-suspension hearings and were not entitled to receive backpay for their suspensions,

because under the terms of their employment and the Constitution, the County had an absolute right to suspend them without pay while they were charged with felonies.

A. The Officers' Employment Terms Allowed Them to Be Suspended without Pay Based Solely on a Felony Charge.

As discussed, this Court has held that the scope of a public employee's constitutionally protected property interest in his or her job is defined by the terms of the employment. *See Roth*, 408 U.S. at 578. In addition, the Ninth Circuit itself has explained that whether a statute or rule "is sufficient to create a property interest will depend largely upon the extent to which the statute contains mandatory language that restricts the discretion of the [decisionmaker]. If the decision to confer a benefit is unconstrained by particularized standards or criteria, no entitlement exists." *Allen v. City of Beverly Hills*, 911 F.2d 367, 370 (9th Cir. 1990) (citation and internal quotation marks omitted); *see also Richardson v. U.S. Customs Service*, 47 F.3d 415, 418-19, 420-21 (Fed. Cir. 1995) (where federal personnel statute allowing summary suspension of employees suspected of crime was silent regarding whether employees who were acquitted and reinstated were entitled to backpay for suspension period, agency was neither required to nor precluded from awarding backpay).

Thus, the Ninth Circuit held that a city employee who was discharged when his position was eliminated did not have a constitutionally protected property interest in continued employment, where no state law or city civil service rule constrained the city's discretion to terminate the employment for reasons other than performance, and to the contrary, the city's municipal code provided that the city could eliminate positions if the city council found it necessary for economic reasons. *Allen*, 911 F.2d at 370-72.

Here, Debs's and O'Donoghue's employment terms not only failed to constrain the County's discretion to suspend them without pay, but affirmatively allowed them to be suspended if they were charged with felonies, and permitted the suspension to continue until the charges were resolved.

First, Rule 18.031 of the Los Angeles County Civil Service Rules provides that the Sheriff's Department may suspend deputy sheriffs based on "any behavior or condition which impairs an employee's qualifications for his or her position or for continued County employment." L.A. County Code, tit. 5, Personnel, Appendix 1, Civil Service Rules (hereafter "Civil Service Rules"),¹¹ rule 18.031.¹² As the dissent

¹¹ The Civil Service Rules are available on the Internet at: http://search.municode.com/html/16274/_DATA/TITLE05/Appendix_1.html.

¹² The rule states:

"Failure of an employee to perform his or her assigned duties so as to meet fully explicitly stated or implied
(Continued on following page)

noted and plaintiffs conceded, “under this standard, a deputy sheriff may be suspended without pay while a felony charge is pending, because the pendency of a felony charge unquestionably ‘impairs’ a deputy Sheriff’s ‘qualifications’ for employment as a law enforcement officer.” (App.27, 39; Appellees’ Supplemental Excerpts of Record 121.) Indeed, this Court recognized in *Gilbert* that the government “has a significant interest in immediately suspending, when felony charges are filed against them, employees who occupy positions of great public trust and high public visibility, such as police officers,” and that – regardless of the officer’s guilt or innocence – an officer’s services to the government may no longer be useful once a felony charge has been filed. *Gilbert*, 520 U.S. at 932.

Second, Rule 18.01 of the Civil Service Rules very specifically provides that an employee may be suspended based on felony charges and the suspension may continue until after the charges are resolved:

standards of performance may constitute adequate grounds for discharge, reduction or suspension. . . . Grounds for discharge, reduction or suspension may also include . . . any behavior or pattern of behavior . . . which is unbecoming a county employee; or any behavior or condition which impairs an employee’s qualifications for his or her position or for continued county employment.” Civil Service Rules, rule 18.031. (See ER 13 [complaint, quoting rule].)

[A]n employee may be suspended . . . for up to and including 30 days, pending investigation, filing of charges and hearing on discharge or reduction, or as a disciplinary measure. *Where the charge upon which a suspension is [sic] the subject of criminal complaint or indictment filed against such employee, the period of suspension may exceed 30 calendar days and continue until, but not after, the expiration of 30 calendar days after the judgment of conviction or the acquittal of the offense charged in the complaint or indictment has become final. . . .*

Civil Service Rules, rule 18.01(A) (emphasis added). (See ER 12.)

Thus, the only process that could be “due” under the officers’ terms of employment is a determination of whether criminal charges were in fact filed. Moreover, nothing in the Civil Service Rules provides that the employee is entitled to be paid for the suspension period.¹³ Nor did plaintiffs point to any state law or other source establishing such a right.

In short, plaintiffs identified no provision of state or local law, and nothing in the officers’ terms of employment, that created “a legitimate claim of

¹³ Civil Service Rule 18.04 provides that the Commission may instruct the appointing power to reinstate a discharged or reduced employee retroactively as of the date of the discharge or reduction, but only if the discharge or reduction is not “justif[ied].” As the dissent noted, “the Sheriff’s Department was fully justified in suspending Debs and O’Donoghue under Rule 18.031.” (App.29 n.3.)

entitlement” to be paid for a period of suspension imposed while the deputies were charged with felonies, regardless of whether they had actually engaged in misconduct – nor, accordingly, any right to a hearing on any issue other than whether felony charges were filed. *See Roth*, 408 U.S. at 577. Under this Court’s holding in *Roth*, this should have disposed of the issue and conclusively established that the officers were not entitled to backpay for their suspensions. Nevertheless, as discussed next, the Ninth Circuit looked further, and in doing so it erred.

B. Plaintiffs Had No Substantive Constitutional Right to Be Paid for the Suspension Period.

The Ninth Circuit held that under this Court’s decision in *Loudermill*, 470 U.S. at 538, Debs and O’Donoghue had “a constitutionally protected property interest in continued employment,” and that their unpaid suspensions deprived them of that interest. (App.8.) The majority then found that due process might require the officers to receive post-suspension hearings in which to challenge not only whether felony charges were filed, but whether the allegations underlying those charges were true, and thereby receive backpay. (*See App.9-10, 13-17.*)

But as explained, in *Gilbert* this Court reined in its holding in *Loudermill* as applied to suspension of police officers based on felony charges. As the dissent noted, *Gilbert* made clear that although public

employees who can be discharged only for cause have property interests in their continued employment, those property interests do *not* extend to police officers' being paid for a period of suspension based on pending felony charges. (App.28-30.) In noting that the government has a strong interest in immediately suspending police officers when felony charges are filed against them, the Court explicitly rejected the plaintiff's assertion that he was entitled to be paid during his suspension. *Gilbert*, 520 U.S. at 932. The Court stated:

[T]he government does not have to give an employee charged with a felony a paid leave at taxpayer expense. If his services to the government are no longer useful once the felony charge has been filed, the Constitution does not require the government to bear the added expense of hiring a replacement while still paying him.

Id.

The Court's statement could hardly be clearer: as far as procedural due process is concerned, when a police officer is charged with a felony, the government may suspend the officer – regardless of the officer's guilt – and does not have to pay him or her. In other words, as the dissent explained, “a suspension without pay while a felony charge is pending does not deprive a law enforcement employee of any constitutionally protected property interest.” (App.28.) For the same reason, the government is not constitutionally required to pay backpay for the suspension after

the fact if the officer is reinstated – otherwise, the government would “still be in the position of paying for both the suspended employee and the employee’s replacement during the suspension period, the very expense *Gilbert* said the government need not bear.” (App.28 n.2.)

Plaintiffs also relied on *FDIC v. Mallen*, 486 U.S. 230 (1988), to argue that the officers were entitled to a post-suspension hearing that would allow them to contest the validity of the allegations underlying the felony charges and thus receive backpay. (See Appellant’s Opening Brief, 9th Cir. docket #24, at 27-28, 30-31; Appellant’s Reply Brief, 9th Cir. docket #35, at 13.) There, this Court addressed the constitutionality of a statute that authorized the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation to suspend an official of a federally insured bank when the official is charged with certain crimes involving dishonesty or breach of trust and the official’s continued service would threaten the bank depositors’ interests or impair public confidence in the bank. *Mallen*, 486 U.S. at 231-35 & n.5, 237-38.¹⁴ The Court found that the statutory procedures for a post-suspension hearing satisfied due process. *Id.* at 245.

In the dicta relied on by plaintiffs, the Court found it inconsequential that the suspended official’s

¹⁴ In *Gilbert*, the Court noted that *Mallen* assumed that the bank official’s suspension would be without pay. *Gilbert*, 520 U.S. at 931 n.1.

criminal trial might conclude before the post-suspension hearing occurred. *Id.* The Court commented:

If [the official] had been promptly acquitted, the basis for the suspension would have disappeared and the [suspension] order would have been vacated. On the other hand, a conviction merely strengthens the case for maintaining the suspension. . . . The criminal trial merely constitutes a potentially intervening factor that may require that the suspension be promptly vacated. . . .

Id. at 245-46 (emphasis added); *see also id.* at 247 (“If the official is successful in the criminal proceeding, then due process has prevailed and the order of suspension must be vacated.”).

Mallen does not create a property right in being paid for a suspension based on a pending felony charge. *Mallen* merely noted that if the suspended bank official was acquitted, the suspension order could be vacated – meaning that the official could go back to work. But *Mallen* never suggested that the official was entitled to be paid for the suspension.

C. The Majority’s Decision Flatly Contradicts This Court’s Holdings in *Board of Regents v. Roth* and *Gilbert v. Homar*.

Even though Debs and O’Donoghue’s employment terms gave them no right to be paid for a suspension based on a felony charge, and under

Loudermill and its progeny the Constitution's due process protections create no such substantive right, the Ninth Circuit created out of whole cloth a right for all police officers to receive pay for a period of suspension imposed while a felony charge is pending, if the officer later proves that the allegations underlying the charge are untrue. As explained, this holding simply cannot be squared with this Court's express directives in *Roth* and *Gilbert*.

The majority denied that it was creating any substantive right. It denied that it was determining what substantive standard should be applied at a post-suspension hearing, and asserted that it was merely holding that a post-suspension hearing that simply duplicated the pre-suspension inquiry (of whether felony charges were filed) was meaningless. (App.16-17, *see* App.9-10.) The majority also denied that it was deciding whether plaintiffs were entitled to backpay, stating that should the issue arise, the district court should resolve it in the first instance. (App.19 n.10.)

But as the dissent noted, "Debs and O'Donoghue's sole complaint [was] that the Commission denied them backpay on the ground that felony charges were (in fact) pending against them while they were suspended." (App.30.) The dissent further noted that for this to state a due process violation, the officers "must show that they have a constitutionally protected property interest specifically in *being paid while felony charges are pending against them.*" (App.30)

(emphasis in original).) By holding that plaintiffs had alleged a plausible due process violation, the majority effectively held that the officers *did* have a property interest that entitled them to be paid in such circumstances. Yet as shown, the officers had no such interest under either their employment terms or the Constitution.

The majority also remanded to the district court to develop the factual record and determine whether the County's post-suspension procedures (in which, plaintiffs alleged, the Commission inquired no further than to confirm that felony charges had in fact been filed (App.13)) satisfied due process under *Mathews*, 424 U.S. 319. (App.15-16.) The majority surmised that the post-suspension hearings might be "more robust than Plaintiffs allege" or the County might have "a strong justification for [its] challenged policy," thus affecting the due process calculus. (App.15.)

But no facts developed on remand could possibly be relevant to the due process inquiry. As shown, the Sheriff's Department had an absolute right under the officers' employment terms and the Constitution to suspend them without pay simply because they were charged with felonies, regardless of whether the charges were true. Accordingly, the County had an absolute right to limit the post-suspension hearing (as well as any pre-suspension hearing) to inquiring whether felony charges had actually been filed. Whether the officers in fact received additional procedures is irrelevant to whether the hearing satisfied

due process. In short, the majority remanded for what would essentially be a meaningless evidentiary hearing in the district court – and, by holding that it was an open question whether the officers were entitled to more procedures than they alleged they received, flatly contravened this Court’s clear holdings in *Gilbert* and *Roth*.

The majority also attempted to distinguish *Gilbert* on the grounds that the plaintiff there eventually received backpay and complained instead that his paycheck had been interrupted during the suspension. Thus, the majority reasoned, “the issue of whether the plaintiff was entitled to backpay was not before the Court.” (App.19 n.10.)

But as the dissent reasoned, *Gilbert* is directly on point. As explained,

Gilbert stated that the government need not “bear the added expense of hiring a replacement while still paying” a suspended law enforcement officer, if that officer’s “services to the government are no longer useful once the felony charge has been filed.” *Gilbert*, 520 U.S. at 932. In short, it is constitutionally permissible not to pay a law enforcement employee who has been suspended with felony charges pending.

(App.28 n.2.) If the government nonetheless had to provide backpay for the suspension period later, as the majority held, the government would be paying

for both the suspended employee and a replacement during the suspension period. (App.28 n.2.)

Finally, the majority denied that *Gilbert* held that a police officer has no constitutionally protected property interest in being paid during a suspension with a felony charge pending. (App.18.) The majority reasoned that “[i]f the plaintiff in *Gilbert* had no protected property interest in his employment, the Court would have ended the inquiry there and concluded he was not entitled to a hearing at all”; instead, the Court “applied the *Mathews* test ‘to determine what process [was] constitutionally due,’” indicating that “the Court considered the plaintiff’s employment to be a protected property interest.” (App.18.)

The majority misses the point. The Court in *Gilbert* assumed *arguendo* that plaintiff’s suspension infringed a protected property interest, entitling him to due process. But in applying the *Mathews* test, the Court determined that whatever the precise scope of that property interest, it did not extend to being paid for the suspension – and whatever process was due, it did not include a substantive component of paying the employee for the suspension while awaiting a hearing.

III. REVIEW IS WARRANTED TO CLARIFY THAT LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES, AS WELL AS PUBLIC EMPLOYERS GENERALLY, ARE ENTITLED, PURSUANT TO THE TERMS OF EMPLOYMENT, TO SUSPEND OFFICERS WITHOUT PAY WHILE FELONY CHARGES ARE PENDING AGAINST THEM, AND NEED NOT INCUR THE DOUBLE EXPENSE OF PAYING FOR BOTH THE EMPLOYEE AND A REPLACEMENT DURING THE SUSPENSION PERIOD.

As explained, the Ninth Circuit's holding that a police officer may have a substantive constitutional right to receive pay for a suspension imposed while a felony charge is pending, regardless of whether (as here) the terms of employment plainly so provide, cannot be squared with this Court's holdings in *Gilbert* and *Roth*.

It is vital that the Court grant review to correct the majority's error. The decision is far-reaching, directly affecting every law enforcement agency within the Ninth Circuit and unsettling the law regarding basic law-enforcement employment practices nationwide. Unfortunately, it is not rare for police officers to be charged with felonies, and as this Court recognized in *Gilbert* and *Roth*, law enforcement agencies must have the power to define the terms of employment so as to allow them to discipline their officers and take appropriate measures to preserve "public confidence in [the] police force."

Gilbert, 520 U.S. at 932. More specifically, law enforcement agencies must know that they can suspend officers whose services are unavailable while felony charges are pending, without being forced to give those officers “a paid leave at taxpayer expense” or incur the substantial double expense of paying both the officer and a replacement during the suspension. *Id.* Without such certainty, agencies may refrain from suspending officers charged with felonies, thus eroding public confidence in law enforcement. Alternatively, the public may be required to bear the costly – and unnecessary – expense of paying officers who are not providing services. By placing law enforcement agencies in such an untenable position, the Ninth Circuit’s decision grossly interferes with the day-to-day operation of essential public services.

Worse yet, the Ninth Circuit’s decision impacts the daily management not only of law enforcement personnel, but virtually all local, state and federal public employees. Like law enforcement agencies, public employers generally must have the power to protect governmental integrity by suspending employees without pay pending disposition of criminal charges that impact the public’s confidence in the ability of public employees to perform their jobs. The Ninth Circuit’s repudiation of this Court’s decisions in *Roth* and *Gilbert*, and its suggestion that an open-ended “due process” inquiry may supplant the precise terms of employment defined by federal, state or local law, directly threatens that power. It is essential that this Court grant review to settle the law and protect

the ability of law enforcement agencies and all public employers to discipline their employees and preserve the integrity of government.



CONCLUSION

For the foregoing reasons, the petition for writ of certiorari should be granted.

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