#### Syllabus

NOTE: Where it is feasible, a syllabus (headnote) will be released, as is being done in connection with this case, at the time the opinion is issued. The syllabus constitutes no part of the opinion of the Court but has been prepared by the Reporter of Decisions for the convenience of the reader. See United States v. Detroit Timber & Lumber Co., 200 U. S. 321, 337.

# SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES

#### Syllabus

# NORTH CAROLINA STATE BOARD OF DENTAL EXAMINERS v. FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION

# CERTIORARI TO THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE FOURTH CIRCUIT

No. 13-534. Argued October 14, 2014—Decided February 25, 2015

North Carolina's Dental Practice Act (Act) provides that the North Carolina State Board of Dental Examin ers (Board) is "the agency of the State for the regulation of the practice of dentistry." The Board's principal duty is to create, administer, and enforce a licensing system for dentists; and six of its eight members must be licensed, practicing dentists.

ster,63.9(e)-1.1e 15.4(t.001 h whiten -0.dmiJ -3ation of t1 Tcng)e4.5 0.0023 Tw 6 -1.207694 Td [(of 27Ac)-3.8( tists did, the Board issued at least 47 official cease-and-desist letters to nondentist teeth whitening service providers and product manufacturers, often warning that the un licensed practice of dentistry is a crime. This and other related Board actions led nondentists to cease offering teeth whitening services in North Carolina.

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) filed an administrative complaint, alleging that the Board's concerted action to exclude nondentists from the market for teeth whitening services in North Carolina constituted an anticompetite ive and unfair method of competition under the Federal Trade Commission Act. An Administrative plaint, cs in NALJ) thei3(c(a))-7-3.62s7co

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all respects.

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Held: Because a controlling number of the Board's decisionmakers are active market participants in the occupation the Board regulates, the Board can invoke state-action antitroust immunity only if it was subject to active supervision by the State, and here that requirement is

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harm by requiring the State to review and approve interstitial policies made by the entity claiming immunity. Pp. 6–10.

- (2) There are instances in which an actor can be excused from Midcal 's active supervision requiremen t. Municipalities, which are electorally accountable, have general regulatory powers, and have no private price-fixing agenda, are subject exclusively to the clear articulation requirement. See Hallie v. Eau Claire, 471 U. S. 34, 35. That Hallie excused municipalities from Midcal 's supervision rule for these reasons, however, all but confirms the rule's applicability to ac tors controlled by active market participants. Further, in light of Omni's holding that an otherwise i mmune entity will not lose immunity based on ad hoc and ex post questioning of its motives for making particular decisions, 499 U.S., at 374, it is all the more nec essary to ensure the conditions fo r granting immunity are met in the first place, see FTC v. Ticor Title Ins. Co., 504 U.S. 621, 633, and Phoebe Putney, supra, at \_\_\_. The clear lesson of precedent is that Midcal 's active supervision test is an essential prerequisite of immunity for any nonsovereign en tity-public or private-controlled by active market participants. Pp. 10-12.
- (3) The Board's argument that entities designated by the States as agencies are exempt from Midcal 's second requirement cannot be reconciled with the Court's repeated conclusion that the need for supervision turns not on the formal designation given by States to regu lators but on the risk that active market participants will pursue private interests in restraining trade. State agencies controlled by active market participants pose the very risk of self-dealing supervision requirement was created to address. See Goldfarb v. Virginia State Bar , 421 U.S. 773, 791. This conclusion does not question the good faith of state office rs but rather is an assessment of the structural risk of market participants' confusing their own interests with the State's policy goals. While Hallie stated "it is likely that active state supervision would also not be required" for agencies, 471 U. S., at 46, n. 10, the entity there was more like prototypical state agencies, not specialized boar ds dominated by active market participants. The latter are simila r to private trade associations vested by States with regulatory authority, which must satisfy Midcal 's active supervision standard. 445 U.S., at 105-106. The similarities between agencies controlled by active market participants and such associations are not eliminated simply because the former are given a formal designation by the State, vested with a measure of government power, and required to follow some procedural rules. See Hallie, supra, at 39. When a State empowers a group of active market participants to deci de who can participate in its market, and on what terms, the need for supervision is manifest. Thus,

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the Court holds today that a state board on which a controlling number of decisionmakers are active ma rket participants in the occupation the board regulates must satisfy Midcal 's active supervision requirement in order to invoke st ate-action antitrust immunity. Pp. 12–14.

(4) The State argues that allowing this FTC order to stand will discourage dedicated citizens from serving on state agencies that regulate their own occupation. But this holding is not inconsistent with the idea that those who purs ue a calling must embrace ethical standards that derive from a duty separate from the dictates of the State. Further, this case does not offer occasion to address the question whether agency officials, including board members, may, under some circumstances, enjoy immunity from damages liability. Of course, States may provide for the defense and indemnification of agency members in the event of litigation, and they can also ensure Parker immunity is available by adopting clear policies to displace competition and providing active su pervision. Arguments against the wisdom of applying the antitrust la ws to professional regulation ab-

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supervision is not an adequate substitute for a decision by the State," Ticor, supra, at 638. Further, the state supervisor may not itself be an active market participant. In general, however, the adequacy of supervision otherwise will depend on all the circumstances of a case. Pp. 17–18.

717 F. 3d 359, affirmed.

Kennedy, J., delivered the opinion of the Court, in which R  $\,$  oberts, C. J., and Ginsburg, Breyer, Sotomayor, and Kagan, JJ., joined. Alito, J., filed a dissenting opinion, in which S  $\,$  calia and Thomas, JJ., joined.

90–41. To perform that function it has broad authority over licensees. See §90–41. The Board's authority with respect to unlicensed persons, however, is more restricted: like "any resident citizen," the Board may file suit to "perpetually enjoin any person from . . . unlawfully practicing dentistry." §90–40.1.

The Act provides that six of the Board's eight members must be licensed dentists engaged in the active practice of dentistry. §90–22. They are elected by other licensed dentists in North Carolina, who cast their ballots in elections conducted by the Board. Ibid. The seventh member must be a licensed and practicing dental hygienist, and he or she is elected by other licensed hygienists. Ibid. The final member is referred to by the Act as a "consumer" and is appointed by the Governor. Ibid. All members serve 3-year terms, and no person may serve more than two consecutive terms. Ibid. The Act does not create any mechanism for the removal of an elected member of the Board by a public official. See ibid.

Board members swear an oath of office, §138A–22(a), and the Board must comply with the State's Administrative Procedure Act, §150B–1 et seq., Public Records Act, §132–1 et seq., and open-meetings law, §143–318.9 et seq. The Board may promulgate rules and regulations governing the practice of dentistry within the State, provided those mandates are not inconsistent with the Act and are approved by the North Carolina Rules Review Commission, whose members are appointed by the state legislature. See §§90–48, 143B–30.1, 150B–21.9(a).

В

In the 1990's, dentists in North Carolina started whitening teeth. Many of those who did so, including 8 of the Board's 10 members during the period at issue in this case, earned substantial fees for that service. By 2003, nondentists arrived on the scene. They charged lower

prices for their services than the dentists did. Dentists soon began to complain to the Board about their new competitors. Few complaints warned of possible harm to consumers. Most expressed a principal concern with the low prices charged by nondentists.

Responding to these filings, the Board opened an investigation into nondentist teeth whitening. A dentist member was placed in charge of the inquiry. Neither the Board's hygienist member nor its consumer member participated in this undertaking. The Board's chief operations officer remarked that the Board was "going forth to do battle" with nondentists. App. to Pet. for Cert. 103a. The Board's concern did not result in a formal rule or regulation reviewable by the independent Rules Review Commission, even though the Act does not, by its terms, specify that teeth whitening is "the practice of dentistry."

Starting in 2006, the Board issued at least 47 cease-and-desist letters on its official letterhead to nondentist teeth whitening service providers and product manufacturers. Many of those letters directed the recipient to cease "all activity constituting the practice of dentistry"; warned that the unlicensed practice of dentistry is a crime; and strongly implied (or expressly stated) that teeth whitening constitutes "the practice of dentistry." App. 13, 15. In early 2007, the Board persuaded the North Carolina Board of Cosmetic Art Examiners to warn cosmetologists against providing teeth whitening services. Later that year, the Board sent letters to mall operators, stating that kiosk teeth whiteners were violating the Dental Practice Act and advising that the malls consider expelling violators from their premises.

These actions had the intended result. Nondentists ceased offering teeth whitening services in North Carolina.

 $\mathcal{C}$ 

In 2010, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) filed an

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recognized Congress' purpose to respect the federal balance and to "embody in the Sherman Act the federalism principle that the States possess a significant measure of sovereignty under our Constitution." Community Communications Co. v. Boulder, 455 U. S. 40, 53 (1982). Since 1943, the Court has reaffirmed the importance of Parker's central holding. See, e.g., Ticor, supra, at 632–637; Hoover v. Ronwin, 466 U. S. 558, 568 (1984); Lafayette v. Louisiana Power & Light Co., 435 U. S. 389, 394–400 (1978).

Ш

In this case the Board argues its members were invested by North Carolina with the power of the State and that, as a result, the Board's actions are cloaked with Parker immunity. This argument fails, however. A nonsovereign actor controlled by active market participants—such as the Board—enjoys Parker immunity only if it satisfies two requirements: "first that 'the challenged restraint . . . be one clearly articulated and affirmatively expressed as state policy,' and second that 'the policy . . . be actively supervised by the State.'" FTC v. Phoebe Putney Health System, Inc., 568 U. S. \_\_\_\_, \_\_\_ (2013) (slip op., at 7) (quoting California Retail Liquor Dealers Assn. v. Midcal Aluminum, Inc., 445 U.S. 97, 105 (1980)). The parties have assumed that the clear articulation requirement is satisfied, and we do the same. While North Carolina prohibits the unauthorized practice of dentistry, however, its Act is silent on whether that broad prohibition covers teeth whitening. Here, the Board did not receive active supervision by the State when it interpreted the Act as addressing teeth whitening and when it enforced that policy by issuing cease-and-desist letters to nondentist teeth whiteners.

Α

Although state-action immunity exists to avoid conflicts

between state sovereignty and the Nation's commitment to a policy of robust competition, Parker immunity is not unbounded. "[G]iven the fundamental national values of free enterprise and economic competition that are embodied in the federal antitrust laws, 'state action immunity is disfavored, much as are repeals by implication.'" Phoebe Putney, supra, at \_\_\_\_ (slip op., at 7) (quoting Ticor, supra, at 636).

An entity may not invoke Parker immunity unless the actions in question are an exercise of the State's sovereign power. See Columbia v. Omni Outdoor Advertising, Inc., 499 U. S. 365, 374 (1991). State legislation and "decision[s] of a state supreme court, acting legislatively rather than judicially," will satisfy this standard, and "ipso facto are exempt from the operation of the antitrust laws" because they are an undoubted ex

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Parker's rationale to ensure the States accept political accountability for anticompetitive conduct they permit and control. See Ticor, 504 U. S., at 636.

Limits on state-action immunity are most essential when the State seeks to delegate its regulatory power to active market participants, for established ethical standards may blend with private anticompetitive motives in a way difficult even for market participants to discern. Dual allegiances are not always apparent to an actor. In consequence, active market participants cannot be allowed to regulate their own markets free from antitrust accountability. See Midcal, supra, at 106 ("The national policy in favor of competition cannot be thwarted by casting [a] gauzy cloak of state involvement over what is essentially a private price-fixing arrangement"). Indeed, prohibitions against anticompetitive self-regulation by active market participants are an axiom of federal antitrust policy. See, e.g.,

satisfy this test yet still be defined at so high a level of generality as to leave open critical questions about how and to what extent the market should be regulated. See Ticor, supra, at 636–637. Entities purporting to act under state authority might diverge from the State's considered definition of the public good. The resulting asymmetry between a state policy and its implementation can invite private self-dealing. The second Midcal requirement—active supervision—seeks to avoid this harm by requiring the State to review and approve interstitial policies made by the entity claiming immunity.

Midcal's supervision rule "stems from the recognition that '[w]here a private party is engaging in anticompetitive activity, there is a real danger that he is acting to further his own interests, rather than the governmental interests of the State.'" Patrick, supra, at 100. Concern about the private incentives of active market participants animates Midcal's supervision mandate, which demands "realistic assurance that a private party's anticompetitive conduct promotes state policy, rather than merely the party's individual interests." Patrick, supra, at 101.

В

In determining whether anticompetitive policies and conduct are indeed the action of a State in its sovereign capacity, there are instances in which an actor can be excused from Midcal's active supervision requirement. In Hallie v. Eau Claire, 471 U. S. 34, 45 (1985), the Court held municipalities are subject exclusively to Midcal's "'clear articulation'" requirement. That rule, the Court

expense of more overriding state goals." 471 U.S., at 47. Hallie further observed that municipalities are electorally accountable and lack the kind of private incentives charac-

turns not on the formal designation given by States to regulators but on the risk that active market participants will pursue private interests in restraining trade.

State agencies controlled by active market participants, who possess singularly strong private interests, pose the very risk of self-dealing Midcal's supervision requirement was created to address. See Areeda & Hovencamp ¶227, at 226. This conclusion does not question the good faith of state officers but rather is an assessment of the structural risk of market participants' confusing their own interests with the State's policy goals. See Patrick, 486 U. S., at 100–101.

The Court applied this reasoning to a state agency in Goldfarb. There the Court denied immunity to a state agency (the Virginia State Bar) controlled by market participants (lawyers) because the agency had "joined in what is essentially a private anticompetitive activity" for "the benefit of its members." 421 U. S., at 791, 792. This emphasis on the Bar's private interests explains why Goldfarb, though it predates Midcal, considered the lack of supervision by the Virginia Supreme Court to be a principal reason for denying immunity. See 421 U. S., at 791; see also Hoover, 466 U. S., at 569 (emphasizing lack of active supervision in Goldfarb); Bates v. State Bar of Ariz., 433 U. S. 350, 361–362 (1977) (granting the Arizona Bar state-action immunity partly because its "rules are subject to pointed re-examination by the policymaker").

While Hallie stated "it is likely that active state supervision would also not be required" for agencies, 471 U. S., at 46, n. 10, the entity there, as was later the case in Omni, was an electorally accountable municipality with general regulatory powers and no private price-fixing agenda. In that and other respects the municipality was more like prototypical state agencies, not specialized boards dominated by active market participants. In important regards, agencies controlled by market partici-

pants are more similar to private trade associations vested by States with regulatory authority than to the agencies Hallie considered. And as the Court observed three years after Hallie, "[t]here is no doubt that the members of such associations often have economic incentives to restrain competition and that the product standards set by such associations have a serious potential for anticompetitive harm." Allied Tube, 486 U. S., at 500. For that reason, those associations must satisfy Midcal's active supervision standard. See Midcal, 445 U. S., at 105–106.

The similarities between agencies controlled by active market participants and private trade associations are not eliminated simply because the former are given a formal designation by the State, vested with a measure of government power, and required to follow some procedural rules. See Hallie, supra, at 39 (rejecting "purely formalistic" analysis). Parker immunity does not derive from nomenclature alone. When a State empowers a group of active market participants to decide who can participate in its market, and on what terms, the need for supervision is manifest. See Areeda & Hovencamp ¶227, at 226. The Court holds today that a state board on which a controlling number of decisionmakers are active market participants in the occupation the board regulates must satisfy Midcal's active supervision requirement in order to invoke state-action antitrust immunity.

D

The State argues that allowing this FTC order to stand will discourage dedicated citizens from serving on state agencies that regulate their own occupation. If this were so—and, for reasons to be noted, it need not be so—there would be some cause for concern. The States have a sovereign interest in structuring their governments, see Gregory v. Ashcroft, 501 U. S. 452, 460 (1991), and may conclude there are substantial benefits to staffing their

present a claim for money damages, does not offer occasion to address the question whether agency officials, including board members, may, under some circumstances, enjoy immunity from damages liability. See Goldfarb, 421 U. S., at 792, n. 22; see also Brief for Respondent 56. And, of course, the States may provide for the defense and indemnification of agency members in the event of litigation.

States, furthermore, can ensure Parker immunity is available to agencies by adopting clear policies to displace competition; and, if agencies controlled by active market participants interpret or enforce those policies, the States may provide active supervision. Precedent confirms this principle. The Court has rejected the argument that it would be unwise to apply the antitrust laws to professional regulation absent compliance with the prerequisites for invoking Parker immunity:

"[Respondents] contend that effective peer review is essential to the provision of quality medical care and that any threat of antitrust liability will prevent physicians from participating openly and actively in peer-review proceedings. This argument, however, essentially challenges the wisdom of applying the antitrust laws to the sphere of medical care, and as such is properly directed to the legislative branch. To the extent that Congress has declined to exempt medical peer review from the reach of the antitrust laws, peer review is immune from antitrust scrutiny only if the State effectively has made this conduct its own." Patrick, 486 U. S. at 105–106 (footnote omitted).

The reasoning of Patrick v. Burget applies to this case with full force, particularly in light of the risks licensing boards dominated by market participants may pose to the free market. See generally Edlin & Haw, Cartels by Another Name: Should Licensed Occupations Face Antitrust Scrutiny? 162 U. Pa. L. Rev. 1093 (2014).

Ε

The Board does not contend in this Court that its anticompetitive conduct was actively supervised by the State or that it should receive Parker immunity on that basis.

By statute, North Carolina delegates control over the practice of dentistry to the Board. The Act, however, says nothing about teeth whitening, a practice that did not exist when it was passed. After receiving complaints from other dentists about the nondentists' cheaper services, the Board's dentist members—some of whom offered whitening services—acted to expel the dentists' competitors from the market. In so doing the Board relied upon cease-anddesist letters threatening criminal liability, rather than any of the powers at its disposal that would invoke oversight by a politically accountable official. With no active supervision by the State, North Carolina officials may well have been unaware that the Board had decided teeth whitening constitutes "the practice of dentistry" and sought to prohibit those who competed against dentists from participating in the teeth whitening market. Whether

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them in this way.<sup>1</sup> Nor is there anything new about the suspicion that the North Carolina Board—in attempting to prevent persons other than dentists from performing teeth-whitening procedures—was serving the interests of dentists and not the public. Professional and occupational licensing requirements have often been used in such a way.<sup>2</sup> But that is not what Parker immunity is about. Indeed, the very state program involved in that case was unquestionably designed to benefit the regulated entities, California raisin growers.

The question before us is not whether such programs serve the public interest. The question, instead, is whether this case is controlled by Parker, and the answer to that question is clear. Under Parker, the Sherman Act (and the Federal Trade Commission Act, see FTC v. Ticor Title Ins. Co., 504 U. S. 621, 635 (1992)) do not apply to state agencies; the North Carolina Board of Dental Examiners is a state agency; and that is the end of the matter. By straying from this simple path, the Court has not only distorted Parker; it has headed into a morass. Determining whether a state agency is structured in a way that militates against regulatory capture is no easy task, and there is reason to fear that today's decision will spawn confusion. The Court has veered off course, and therefore I cannot go along.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup>S. White, History of Oral and Dental Science in America 197–214 (1876) (detailing earliest American regulations of the practice of dentistry).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup>See, e.g., R. Shrylock, Medical Li6teilliest 6mericDC 21, 6 77

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Building Co. v. Trustees of Rex Hospital, 425 U. S. 738, 743, n. 2 (1976) ("[D]ecisions by this Court have permitted the reach of the Sherman Act to expand along with expanding notions of congressional power"). And the expanded reach of the Sherman Act raised an important question. The Sherman Act does not expressly exempt States from its scope. Does that mean that the Act applies to the States and that it potentially outlaws many traditional state regulatory measures? The Court confronted that question in Parker.

In Parker, a raisin producer challenged the California Agricultural Prorate Act, an agricultural price support program. The California Act authorized the creation of an Agricultural Prorate Advisory Commission (Commission) to establish marketing plans for certain agricultural commodities within the State. 317 U. S., at 346–347. Raisins were among the regulated commodities, and so the Commission established a marketing program that governed many aspects of raisin sales, including the quality and quantity of raisins sold, the timing of sales, and the price at which raisins were sold. Id., at 347–348. The Parker Court assumed that this program would have violated "the Sherman Act if it were organized and made effective solely by virtue of a contract, combination or conspiracy of pri-

vate persons, mdu63Pafm2fReTichof(743, n. 2 (197slisly022P01d8m39 Tc 0me)-5.6(ICe pers

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gress may constitutionally subtract from their authority, an unexpressed purpose to nullify a state's control over its officers and agents is not lightly to be attributed to Con-

specifying the qualifications to practice medicine was clearly a proper exercise of the police power. Thus, the North Carolina statutes establishing and specifying the powers of the State Board of Dental Examiners represent precisely the kind of state regulation that the Parker exemption was meant to immunize.

П

As noted above, the only question in this case is whether the North Carolina Board of Dental Examiners is really a state agency, and the answer to that question is clearly yes.

The North Carolina Legislature determined that the practice of dentistry "affect[s] the public health, safety and welfare" of North Carolina's citizens and that therefore the profession should be "subject to regulation and control in the public interest" in order to ensure "that only qualified persons be permitted to practice dentistry in the State." N. C. Gen. Stat. Ann. §90–22(a) (2013).

To further that end, the legislature created the North Carolina State Board of Dental Examiners "as the agency of the State for the regulation of the practice of dentistry in th[e] State." §90–22(b).

The legislature specified the membership of the Board. §90–22(c). It defined the "practice of dentistry," §90–29(b), and it set out standards for licensing practitioners, §90–30. The legislature also set out standards under which the Board can initiate disciplinary proceedings against licensees who engage in certain improper acts. §90–41(a).

The legislature empowered the Board to "maintain an action in the name of the State of North Carolina to perpetually enjoin any person from ... unlawfully practicing dentistry." §90–40.1(a). It authorized the Board to conduct investigations and to hire legal

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counsel, and the legislature made any "notice or statement of charges against any licensee" a public record under state law. §§ 90–41(d)–(g).

The legislature empowered the Board "to enact rules and regulations governing the practice of dentistry within the State," consistent with relevant statutes. §90–48. It has required that any such rules be in

10 G

stances? Suppose that active market participants constitute a voting bloc that is generally able to get its way? How about an obstructionist minority or an agency chair empowered to set the agenda or veto regulations?

Who is an "active market participant"? If Board members withdraw from practice during a short term of service but typically return to practice when their terms end, does that mean that they are not active market participants during their period of service?

What is the scope of the market in which a member may not participate while serving on the board? Must the market be relevant to the particular regulation being challenged or merely to the jurisdiction of the entire agency? Would the result in the present case be different if a majority of the Board members, though practicing dentists, did not provide teeth whitening services? What if they were orthodontists, periodontists, and the like? And how much participation makes a person "active" in the market?

The answers to these questions are not obvious, but the States must predict the answers in order to make informed choices about how to constitute their agencies.

I suppose that all this will be worked out by the lower courts and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), but the Court's approach raises a more fundamental question, and that is why the Court's inquiry should stop with an examination of the structure of a state licensing board. When the Court asks whether market participants control the North Carolina Board, the Court in essence is asking whether this regulatory body has been captured by the entities that it is supposed to regulate. Regulatory capture can occur in many ways.<sup>6</sup> So why ask only whether

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup>See, e.g., R. NoII, Reforming Regulation 40–43, 46 (1971); J. Wilson, The Politics of Regulation 357–394 (1980). Indeed, it has even been

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the members of a board are active market participants? The answer may be that determining when regulatory capture has occurred is no simple task. That answer provides a reason for relieving courts from the obligation to make such determinations at all. It does not explain why it is appropriate for the Court to adopt the rather crude test for capture that constitutes the holding of to-day's decision.

#### IV

The Court has created a new standard for distinguishing between private and state actors for purposes of federal antitrust immunity. This new standard is not true to the Parker doctrine; it diminishes our traditional respect for federalism and state sovereignty; and it will be difficult to apply. I therefore respectfully dissent.

charged that the FTC, which brought this case, has been captured by entities over which it has jurisdiction. See E. Cox, "The Nader Report" on the Federal Trade Commission vii–xiv (1969); Posner, Federal Trade Commission, Chi. L. Rev. 47, 82–84 (1969).