No. 09-5801

IN THE

# Supreme Court of the United States

RUBEN FLORES-VILLAR,

*Petitioner*,

—v.—

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA,

*Respondent.*

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ON WRIT OF CERTIORARI TO THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE NINTH CIRCUIT

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## BRIEF *AMICUS CURIAE* OF THE AMERICAN CIVIL LIBERTIES UNION AND THE ACLU OF SAN DIEGO AND IMPERIAL COUNTIES IN SUPPORT OF PETITIONER

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## STATEMENT OF INTEREST[1]

The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is a nationwide, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization with more than 500,000 members dedicated to protecting the fundamental rights guaranteed by the Constitution and the laws of the United States. The ACLU of San Diego & Imperial Counties is a regional affiliate of the national ACLU.

The ACLU has appeared before this Court in numerous equal protection cases as both direct counsel and *amicus curiae*, including *Miller v. Albright*, 523 U.S. 420 (1998), and *Nguyen v. INS*, 533 U.S. 53 (2001). Through its Women's Rights Project, the ACLU has litigated many cases concerning constitutional challenges to gender-based classifications. The ACLU's Immigrants' Rights Project engages in a nationwide program of litigation and advocacy to enforce and protect the constitutional and civil rights of immigrants.

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[1] Pursuant to Rule 37.3, letters of consent to the filing of this brief have been submitted to the Clerk of the Court. Pursuant to Rule 37.6, counsel for *amici* states that no counsel for a party authored this brief in whole or in part, and no counsel or party made a monetary contribution intended to fund the preparation or submission of this brief. No person other than *amici curiae,* its members or its counsel made a monetary contribution to this brief's preparation or submission.

## STATEMENT OF THE CASE

his mother, if the mother had the nationality of the United States at the time of such person's birth, and if the mother had previously been physically present in the United States or one of its outlying possessions *for a continuous period of one year*.

sixteen at the time of your birth, *it is*

*Amici* submit this brief to address two points regarding the applicable level of equal protection scrutiny. First, the Court should apply heightened scrutiny, as it ordinarily does in gender discrimination cases, and should reject the government's request for a more deferential standard of review based on the plenary power doctrine. Second, in invalidating the law, this Court should correct the Court of Appeals' misapplication of the heightened scrutiny standard by making clear that the Ninth Circuit failed to require a sufficiently substantial fit between the gender-based classification and the governmental interest, and failed to require a sufficiently persuasive justification for relying on gender as a proxy.

1. Under this Court's precedents, former 8 U.S.C. §§ 1401(a)(7) and 1409 are subject to heightened scrutiny because they facially discriminate on the basis of gender.[2] The government contends, however, that heightened scrutiny is the wrong standard because this case involves Congress's plenary power over immigration and argues that the Court should therefore apply a more deferential standard, as the Court has done in

[2] These provisions were amended in 1986. Immigration and Nationality Act, Pub. L. 99-653, 100 Stat. 3657 (1986). Because Petitioner was born before the amendments, the former 8 U.S.C. §§ 1401(a)(7) and 1409 are applicable. Under the current version of the statute, fathers of children born out of wedlock must have five years of total residency, with at least two years occurring after the age of 14 years old, in order to transmit citizenship. 8 U.S.C. §§ 1401(g), 1409(a) (2010). Mothers must have one continuous year of residency prior to the child's birth. 8 U.S.C. § 1409(c) (2010).

immigration cases such as *Fiallo v. Bell*, 430 U.S. 787 (1977). Cert. Opp. at 11. But here, birthright citizenship is at issue, and not Congress's traditional immigration or naturalization powers. *Amici* are not aware of any case in which the Court has applied the plenary power doctrine in a case involving birthright citizenship.

Even assuming, however, that the Court were to view birthright citizenship as falling within the scope of Congress's immigration powers, the Court should nonetheless apply heightened scrutiny, and not the deferential standard of review applied in *Fiallo*. Since *Fiallo*, the Court has rejected attempts to shield congressional action on immigration matters from meaningful judicial scrutiny. *See Zadvydas v. Davis*, 533 U.S. 678 (2001) (detention). More particularly, since *Fiallo* was decided, this Court has made unequivocally clear, in numerous cases, that heightened scrutiny should be applied whenever laws explicitly discriminate on the basis of gender. Consequently, at least in immigration cases involving discrimination on the basis of gender, the Court should apply heightened scrutiny. Whether the plenary power doctrine should be discarded altogether in light of modern developments is not an issue that need be addressed, as this case unquestionably involves an explicit gender-based classification.

2. Once former 8 U.S.C. §§ 1401(a)(7) and 1409 are analyzed under this Court's precedents on heightened scrutiny, it is clear they fail to meet that demanding standard. The government has not demonstrated that the gender classification is

substantially related to an important governmental interest. Rather than reducing statelessness for children of U.S. citizen parents, the differential residency requirements exacerbate the risk that children of U.S. citizen fathers will be rendered stateless simply because of the sex of their U.S. citizen parent. The law violates the right to equal protection by creating an insurmountable hurdle to citizenship transmission for some fathers and cannot be justified as a beneficent allowance to U.S. citizen mothers.

## ARGUMENT

### I. HEIGHTENED SCRUTINY IS THE PROPER STANDARD OF EQUAL PROTECTION REVIEW.

*Amici* agree with Petitioner that Congress's plenary power over immigration matters does not justify reducing the level of equal protection scrutiny applicable here. Pet'r Br. at 15-19. Statutory citizenship at birth is not an immigration or naturalization matter, and this Court has never applied the plenary power doctrine to birthright citizenship laws. Thus, because immigration is not at issue here, the Court need not decide whether Congress's plenary power over immigration and naturalization would otherwise alter the level of scrutiny. But, even if birthright citizenship were deemed to be within the scope of Congress's plenary immigration power, the Court should nonetheless hold, consistent with its post-*Fiallo* precedents, that heightened scrutiny applies where Congress explicitly legislates on the basis of gender.

### A. The Court Need Not Decide Whether The Plenary Power Doctrine Limits The Level Of Equal Protection Scrutiny Because This Case Involves Birthright Citizenship.

#### 1. Statutory Citizenship At Birth Does Not Involve Immigration Or Naturalization.

Congress's conferral of citizenship at birth to children born abroad to citizen parents is fundamentally distinct from the regulation of immigration. At its core, the immigration power pertains to Congress's authority to exclude persons for whom it recognizes no present claim to citizenship, or even entry. *See, e.g.*, *Fiallo v. Bell*, 430 U.S. 787, 795 n.6 (1977) ("We are dealing here with an exercise of the Nation's sovereign power to admit or exclude foreigners . . . ."); *Nguyen v. INS*, 533 U.S. 53, 96 (2001) (O'Connor, J., dissenting) ("The instant case is not about the admission of aliens but instead concerns the logically prior question whether an individual is a citizen in the first place.").

In contrast, this case concerns the right of a U.S. citizen to transmit his citizenship to his citizen or putative citizen child based on a significant familial connection. It is beyond dispute that citizenship is an important and unique right. *See, e.g.*, *Kennedy v. Mendoza-Martinez*, 372 U.S. 144, 159 (1963) (recognizing that the right of citizenship is "a most precious right"); *see also Afroyim v. Rusk*, 387 U.S. 253, 267-68 (1967) ("Citizenship is no light trifle to be jeopardized any moment Congress decides to do

so under the name of one of its general or implied grants of power. . . . [The] citizenry is the country and the country is its citizenry."). While Congress may generally restrict the conferral of *jus sanguinis* citizenship by statute, Congress's determinations in this regard must satisfy constitutional standards, including equal protection.[3]

Similarly, although citizenship through naturalization rests upon proven ties to the country, it is legally distinct from statutory citizenship at birth. Naturalization involves acquisition of a new status that begins only when naturalization is complete. *See* 8 U.S.C. § 1101(a)(23) ("The term 'naturalization' means the conferring of nationality of a state upon a person *after* birth, by any means whatsoever.") (emphasis added).

Statutory citizenship at birth constitutes recognition of a status created at the time of the child's birth by virtue of the child's parentage. If the conditions for statutory citizenship at birth are met, that existing status is recognized. *See* 8 U.S.C. § 1409(a) (acknowledging citizenship "as of the date of birth"); *see also Miller*, 523 U.S. at 432 (Stevens, J.)

rather than grant her rights that she does not now

### 2. The Court Has Never Extended The Plenary Power Doctrine To Citizenship At Birth.

So far as we have been able to determine, this Court has never exempted birthright citizenship determinations from ordinary constitutional analysis, much less held that heightened scrutiny would not apply if such determinations were based on explicit gender classifications. *See Miller*, 523 U.S. at 480 (Breyer, J., dissenting) ("The Court to my

that he had failed to meet any conditions lawfully placed on his citizenship by Congress. *See id.* at 827 (noting plaintiff's claim to "continuing" citizenship). *Accord Nguyen*, 533 U.S. at 96-97 (O'Connor, J., dissenting) ("A predicate for application of the deference commanded by *Fiallo* is that the individuals concerned be aliens. But whether that predicate obtains is the very matter at issue in this case."); *see also Miller*, 523 U.S. at 433 n.10 (Stevens, J.).

Nor did the Court in *Bellei* simply defer to Congress's judgment as to what conditions to place on statutory citizenship at birth. Instead, the Court satisfied itself that the congressional scheme reflected "careful consideration," and was "purposeful, not accidental." 401 U.S. at 833. In the absence of a classification requiring heightened review (the statute there was gender-neutral), the Court exercised rational basis review, holding that wh n.10 (Stevens,

In *Fiallo*, three sets of unwed natural fathers and their children each sought a special immigration preference by virtue of a relationship to a citizen or resident alien child or parent. Rather than employ full-fledged constitutional scrutiny, this Court deferred to Congress's plenary power in setting immigration policy, examining only whether the challenged statute was based on a "facially legitimate and bona fide reason." *Fiallo*, 430 U.S. at 794. Thus, because *Fiallo* involved immigration benefits, it does not resolve the appropriate level of equal protection scrutiny where Congress draws explicit gender-based lines in the context of *birthright* citizenship. *See, e.g.*, *Miller*, 523 U.S. at 429 (Stevens, J.) (*Fiallo* "involved the claims of several aliens to a special immigration preference, whereas here petitioner claims that she is, and for years has been, an American citizen."); *see also id.* at 432-33; *Nguyen*, 533 U.S. at 96 (O'Connor, J., dissenting) ("*Fiallo* . . . is readily distinguished. *Fiallo* involved constitutional challenges to various statutory distinctions, including a classification based on the sex of a United States citizen or lawful permanent resident, that determined the availability Breygra a312 T003 nT0 1 Tf0.0022 Tc 0 Tw 3.85905tion14

at birth would mean that such statutes "could discriminate virtually free of independent judicial review." 523 U.S. at 478 (Breyer, J., dissenting). *Cf. Trop v. Dulles*, 356 U.S. 86, 104 (1958) (plurality opinion) (holding that a statute stripping military deserters of U.S. citizenship was unconstitutional, and observing that "[w]hen it appears that an Act of Congress conflicts with [a constitutional] provision[], we have no choice but to enforce the paramount commands of the Constitution. We are sworn to do no less.").

For centuries, Congress has recognized that birth to a United States citizen is a sufficiently strong tie to this country to make a child eligible for citizenship at birth. Because this case involves birthright citizenship, heightened scrutiny is the appropriate standard of review. The Court need not determine, therefore, whether the plenary power doctrine would otherwise dictate a more deferential standard of review if this were a traditional immigration or naturalization case.

### B. Heightened Scrutiny Is The Proper Standard Even If The Court Were To View Birthright Citizenship As A Traditional Immigration And Naturalization Issue.

Even if the Court were to conclude that birthright citizenship is an immigration and naturalization issue, heightened scrutiny is nonetheless the applicable standard. As an initial matter, the Court's recent immigration precedents have taken a more measured approach to the plenary

power doctrine than suggested by the government in this case. Indeed, since *Fiallo*, the Court has been increasingly reluctant to insulate immigration legislation from searching constitutional scrutiny. *See, e.g.*, *Landon v. Plasencia*, 459 U.S. 21, 32-35, 37

The Court's recent measured approach to the plenary power doctrine is appropriate given the extraordinary nature of the doctrine. But the Court need not decide in this case whether the plenary power doctrine should generally be discarded or tempered in all immigration contexts, because this case involves discrimination on the basis of gender. At least in such cases, the Court ought to apply ordinary constitutional standards of review, and reject the outdated *Fiallo* approach.

Rejecting the *Fiallo* approach in this case is especially appropriate in light of this Court's post-*Fiallo* gender precedents. Indeed, it was after *Fiallo* was decided that this Court issued its "pathmarking decisions" instructing that "[p]arties who seek to defend gender-based government action must demonstrate an 'exceedingly persuasive justification' for that action." *United States v. Virginia*, 518 U.S. 515, 531 (1996) (citation omitted). Both *Virginia* and the "pathmarking decisions" it cited, *J.E.B. v.*

*Dep't of Human Res. v. Hibbs*, 538 U.S. 721, 728 (2003).

To allow gender discrimination to exist in one area of the law damages the entire fabric of the Court's equal protection jurisprudence and perpetuates the harms that jurisprudence seeks to eliminate. *See, e.g.*, *Nguyen*, 533 U.S. at 83 (O'Connor, J., dissenting). It also sounds a powerfully negative message that the Nation's highest institutions do not truly believe that unequal treatment on the basis of gender is *always* intolerable. *Id*. at 74.

As the Court has repeatedly made clear, the purpose of applying heightened scrutiny is to ensure that the Court can flush out instances where the legislature has relied on antiquated views: "[T]his Court consistently has subjected gender-based classifications to heightened scrutiny in recognition

also where Congress enacted legislation based on the most rank racial stereotypes. At this stage in the country's history, the Court should not endorse the government's position.

## II. THE GENDER-BASED RESIDENCY REQUIREMENTS DO NOT SURVIVE HEIGHTENED SCRUTINY.

Heightened scrutiny is the requisite standard for all cases involving laws that explicitly discriminate based on sex. Once heightened scrutiny is correctly applied, the disparate residency requirements in § 1409 cannot survive constitutional challenge. *See Hibbs*, 538 U.S. at 728; *Virginia*, 518 U.S. at 532-33; *see also J.E.B.*, 511 U.S. at 135; *Hogan*, 458 U.S. at 723-24.

While purporting to apply heightened scrutiny, the Ninth Circuit departed sharply from this Court's precedents. The framework for analyzing gender-based equal protection challenges is well-established. An "exceedingly persuasive justification . . . must be the solid base for any gender-defined classification." *Virginia*, 518 U.S. at 546. "The State must show at least that the [challenged] classification serves 'important governmental objectives and that the discriminatory means employed' are 'substantially related to the achievement of those objectives.'" *Id.* at 532. An equal protection violation can occur even when empirical evidence might suggest that there is some correlation between gender and the trait for which it is serving as a proxy. *J.E.B.*, 511 U.S. at 139 n.11; *Weinberger v. Wiesenfeld*, 420 U.S. 636, 645 (1975);

*Craig v. Boren*, 429 U.S. 190, 202 (1976); *Frontiero v. Richardson*, 411 U.S. 677, 688-89 (1973) (plurality opinion). Central to the analysis is whether the treatment of the different groups of men and women created by the classification furthers the governmental interest. *See Califano v. Goldfarb*, 430 U.S. 199, 215 (1977) (noting that Congress had not given any attention to the specific case of nondependent widows and their need of benefits when striking down a federal law that granted benefits to all widows but only to dependent widowers). The state's burden is "demanding," and the justification must be "genuine, not hypothesized or invented *post hoc* in response to litigation." *Virginia*, 518 U.S. at 533.

Gender classifications warrant heightened scrutiny because "[w]hat differentiates sex from such nonsuspect statuses as intelligence or physical disability . . . is that the sex characteristic frequently bears no relation to ability to perform." *Frontiero*, 411 U.S. at 686. To tolerate a gender-based classification unsupported by an exceedingly persuasive justification would violate a core constitutional principle: "At the heart of the constitution's guarantee of equal protection lies the simple command that the Government must treat citizens as individuals, not as simply components of a racial [or] sexual . . . class." *J.E.B.*, 511 U.S. at 152-53 (Kennedy, J., concurring).

This Court's equal protection jurisprudence mandates a much more skeptical inquiry into the fit between a gender classification and the asserted governmental interest than the Ninth Circuit's

decision reflects. Viewed through the proper constitutional lens, the fit here is far too tenuous to satisfy heightened scrutiny.

The government argues, and the court below found, that § 1409 represents a tailored response to the risk of statelessness faced by non-marital children born abroad to U.S. citizen mothers. That conclusion is wrong on numerous grounds.

*First*, the problem of statelessness is not confined to the non-marital children of U.S. citizen mothers. It exists for the non-marital children of U.S. citizen fathers as well. Under heightened scrutiny, the government faces a heavy burden of showing why a problem faced by both men and women should be addressed by a statute that differentiates based on gender. Yet, the court below did not require the government to show how many non-marital children at risk of statelessness with one U.S. citizen parent are children of U.S. citizen mothers, or the extent to which being born abroad out of wedlock to a U.S. citizen mother correlates with statelessness generally. Nor did the government offer such proof. Indeed, the government has not pointed to any study or compilation of data that supports its assertion that "the risk that a child born abroad to unmarried parents will be rendered stateless is much higher when his mother is a United States citizen," Cert. Opp. at 15. Pet'r Br. at 27-34; Br. of Amici Curiae Scholars on Statelessness.

*Second*, lacking record evidence, the Ninth Circuit assumed that Congress adopted the disparate residency requirements in § 1409 as a considered

response to the problem of statelessness, and that this conclusion was sufficiently persuasive in light of Congress's authority in the area of immigration and citizenship. *Flores-Villar*, 536 F.3d at 996. The legislative history is far less clear. The provisions governing the transmission of citizenship to children born out of wedlock were first adopted in 1940. The legislative hearings that led to passage of the 1940 Act are silent on the risk of statelessness facing the non-marital children of either U.S. citizen mothers or fathers. Pet'r Br. at 36. This silence simply does not support the conclusion that Congress recognized a unique problem faced by the non-marital children of U.S. citizen mothers, but not fathers, and drafted the statutory language in response.

In fact, the problem of statelessness is not unique to the non-marital children of U.S. citizen mothers. Many non-marital children of U.S. citizen fathers are at risk of statelessness because they are born in countries that recognize the paternal transmission of statutory birthright citizenship. Pet'r Br. at 30-31 n.10; Br. of Amici Curiae Scholars on Statelessness. Many other children become stateless because they are born in countries where acknowledgement or legitimation by the father

statelessness for non-marital children born abroad to U.S. citizen fathers. For U.S. citizen mothers, the rules matched prior State Department policy: the non-marital child of a U.S. citizen mother was entitled to U.S. citizenship if the mother had resided in the U.S. for any period of time prior to the child's birth. Kristin Collins, Note, *When Fathers' Rights Are Mothers' Duties: The Failure of Equal Protection in* Miller v. Albright, 109 Yale L.J. 1669, 1689-93 (2000).[6] As a result of the 1940 Act, however, a U.S. citizen father under the same circumstances was required to show that he had resided in the U.S. for a total of ten years, five of which were after the age of 16 years old.[7]

The government seeks to explain the disparate residency requirements adopted in 1940 by pointing to a passage from the Senate Report accompanying the 1952 Act, but its reliance is misplaced. U.S. Br., *U.S. v. Flores-Villar*, 2008 WL 1848810 *14 (9th Cir. 2008) (No. 07-50445). The 1952 Act made various changes to the provisions governing birthright citizenship, and the Senate Report explained one of

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[6] Furthermore, non-marital children of U.S. citizen mothers and fathers faced differential residency requirements to *retain* their citizenship. While children of U.S. citizen mothers absolutely acquired citizenship at birth, children of U.S. citizen fathers were required to reside in the were r6(Immigra12 0 Td9 0.034 for6eg-403ed in 1940j0.0)TjwhicN

those changes by stating: "This provision establishing the child's nationality as that of the mother regardless of the legitimation or establishment of paternity is new. It insures that the child shall have a nationality at birth." S. Rep. 1137, 82d Cong., 2d Sess. 39 (1952). This statement, however, did not address the disparate residency requirements at issue here. Rather, it referred to the deletion of a provision that allowed mothers to transmit citizenship only when legitimation by the father had not occurred. The Report recognizes that this non-legitimation condition had created uncertainty for children because legitimation remained a possibility until the child reached the age of majority. By eliminating that contingency, Congress ensured that children could acquire a nationality through their mothers at birth, rather than being forced to wait to discover whether or not they were U.S. citizens. Because the Report language was not even trying to justify the disparate residency requirements, it certainly does not meet

generalizations as a basis for legislative classifications.

The facts of this case highlight the unfairness of such generalizations. The Petitioner's father is

benefit for U.S. citizen mothers whose non-marital children were born abroad, section 1409 is an unconstitutional means of accomplishing that goal because it unfairly and unnecessarily disadvantages the similarly situated children of U.S. citizen fathers. This Court's precedents establish that "[s]ex classifications may be used to compensate women for particular economic disabilities they have suffered, to promote equal employment opportunity, or to advance full development of the talent and capacities of our Nation's people." *Virginia*, 518 U.S. at 533 (citations omitted). But they cannot be used "for denigration of the members of either sex or for artificial constraints on an individual's opportunity." *Id*.

*Fifth*, the Ninth Circuit failed to address the existence of gender-neutral alternatives, an important factor in evaluating the validity of a gender-based classification. *See Wengler v. Druggists Mut. Ins. Co.*, 446 U.S. 142, 151 (1980); *Orr v. Orr*, 440 U.S. 268, 281 (1979); *Craig*, 429 U.S. at 199. If statelessness is the true concern, the government could simply adopt the length of residency required of mothers for fathers, or it could make individualized determinations about the risk of statelessness depending on the circumstances of the child's birth. Unconstitutional discrimination cannot be justified on the basis of administrative convenience.[9] As this Court has noted: "[A]ny statutory scheme which draws a sharp line between

the next 18 years." 533 U.S. at 70-71. That is not true here. In denying the Petitioner's claim to

ments of § 1409 are not substantially related to any interest in reducing statelessness, completely shut out some members of one sex from transmitting citizenship, and were not designed to redress disparate treatment of women. They impermissibly distinguish between similarly situated parents and thus violate the right to equal protection.

## CONCLUSION

For the foregoing reasons, the judgment of the Court of Appeals should be reversed.

Respectfully submitted,

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