

Petition Without Prejudice: Against the Fraud Exception to *Noerr-Pennington* Immunity from the Toxic Tort Perspective

James M. Sabovich*

I. Introduction

By prohibiting laws “abridging the right of the people . . . to petition the government for redress of grievances,” the petition clause of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution gives safe harbor to all genuine efforts to influence government decisions.¹ Those words forbid the government from outlawing or punishing its citizens’ petitions, so while the government may reject a petitioner’s argument, it may never sanction him for making it. Under the *Noerr-Pennington* doctrine,² the petition clause also forecloses private parties from invoking the government’s coercive power to do the same through the tort system. The *Noerr-Pennington* doctrine accomplishes this by stating generally that one cannot be held civilly liable for genuine attempts to influence government action. Similar protections are also afforded in most states

* The author received his J.D. from UCLA in 2001. He is currently a senior associate in Gibson, Dunn & Crutcher, LLP’s Environmental and Natural Resources Practice Group, where he has worked on multiple large toxic torts, other assorted environmental litigations and corporate transactions with environmental components. He became interested in the intersection of the First Amendment petition clause with toxic torts after both defending a lobbyist and opposing efforts to predicate punitive damages on a defendant’s historical petitioning activities. This article was only possible with the loving tolerance of my wife, Georgia Sabovich, and with the support and guidance of other attorneys within my practice group. Robert Loewen, in particular, often loaned his extensive toxic tort experience to this effort. My fellow associates Sarah Schlosser and Thomas Manakides were invaluable as sounding boards and in offering journal insights.

1. U.S. CONST. amend. I (“Congress shall make no law . . . abridging the right of the people . . . to petition the government for redress of grievances.”); CAL. CONST. art. I, § 3 (“The people have the right to . . . petition government for redress of grievances.”).

2. See generally *E. R.R. Pres. Conf. v. Noerr Motor Freight*, 365 U.S. 127 (1961) (setting out the protection for the first time). Throughout this article, “*Noerr-Pennington* immunity,” “petition immunity” and “political speech immunity” are used interchangeably to refer to *Noerr*’s protection.

by statutory or case law privileges against liability for statements made in official proceedings.³

History teaches that protection of First Amendment freedoms requires considerable vigilance, especially against restrictions aimed at conforming speech to popular belief or prejudice. The petition clause, after all, only narrowly survived restrictions aimed at limiting politically unpopular abolitionist lobbying, which was argued to have been illegal.⁴ Today, a movement is afoot to create a sweeping “fraud exception” to petition immunity, thereby revoking it in the common circumstance where opposing viewpoints attribute deceit to each other.

The need for vigilance in the protection of the right to petition is demonstrated in the area of toxic torts.⁵ Born of Vietnam’s Agent Orange⁶ and the pharmaceutical cases of the 1960s and 1970s, the modern toxic tort is often typified by powerful political interests on both sides, billion-dollar stakes, entrepreneurial sophistication and broad social implications, all to a degree beyond that found in typical personal injury lawsuits.⁷ The toxic tort’s core allegation is that some misconduct by a defendant caused a plaintiff to be exposed to a substance, which then brought on some ailment.⁸ In environmental toxic torts, this is often coupled with claims that the defendant knew it was contaminating the air

3. See *infra* Part II.B.

4. See Stephen A. Higginson, *A Short History of the Right to Petition Government for the Redress of Grievances*, 96 YALE L.J. 142, 160 (1986) (discussing the right to petition crisis over abolition, including “gag” rules against abolitionists petitioning in Southern states and arguments that such petitions were unlawful).

5. Because the term “toxic tort” refers to cases in which the plaintiff alleges injury from some exposure, it technically includes everything from an isolated case of food poisoning at a local restaurant to massive, industry-wide litigation over breast implants. See, e.g., *Henry v. Dow Chem. Co.*, 473 Mich. 63, 67 (2005) (“In an ordinary ‘toxic tort’ cause of action, a plaintiff alleges he has developed a disease because of exposure to a toxic substance negligently released by the defendant.”). In discussing toxic torts, this article refers more to the large, high-stakes types of lawsuits epitomized by the latter of these.

6. See John C. Coffee, Jr., *Class Wars: The Dilemma of the Mass Tort Class Action*, 95 COLUM. L. REV. 1343, 1356 (1995) (discussing the impact of Vietnam’s Agent Orange on toxic torts).

7. See *infra* Part VI.

8. See MICHAEL DORE, *LAW OF TOXIC TORTS* § 2:1 (2006); MARGIE SEARCY-ALFORD, *GUIDE TO TOXIC TORTS* § 1.02 (2006); *Cottle v. Super. Ct.*, 3 Cal. App. 4th 1367, 1371 (Ct. App. 1992). The major components of the toxic tort and, therefore, whether the energies of the plaintiff and defense counsel are correspondingly devoted, are the company’s handling of chemicals (conduct), showing that the defendant’s chemicals reached the plaintiff in small or large quantities (fate and transport) and establishing that those chemicals did or did not bring about whatever ailments the plaintiff claims (causation). See Jonathan Mosher, *A Pound of Cause for a Penny of Proof: The Failed Economy of an Eroded Causation Standard in Toxic Tort Cases*, 11 N.Y.U. ENVTL. L.J. 531, 586 (2003).

or the groundwater, but misrepresented that information to regulators.⁹ I refer to the subject of such allegations as “site-specific lobbying.” In the case of more general lobbying, a plaintiff alleges that a defendant downplayed the danger of its substance to regulators. To separate this general lobbying from its more limited counterpart, I call the subject of such allegations “legislative lobbying.”

Both types of allegations seek to impose tort liability for political speech, that is, behavior aimed at affecting government decisions; thus, they conflict with *Noerr-Pennington*. The name of the clash is the “fraud exception” to *Noerr-Pennington*, which states that in certain circumstances the petition alleged to be deceptive does not deserve protection.¹⁰ If narrowly interpreted, most lobbying activity will remain protected against civil liability; if broadly interpreted, the exception threatens to swallow the bulk of petition immunity for environmental lobbying. After examining the cases that have fashioned the fraud exception, this article argues that there should be no such exception or that it should be narrowly drawn. This is because tying immunity to an opponent’s view of the petitioner’s veracity will only chill political speech. Instead, as is currently the prevailing view, communications genuinely meant to influence government action should be immune from tort liability without regard to allegations of fraud in the information communicated.

II. Tort Immunity for Petitions to Government

The First Amendment of the United States and the California Constitution guarantee the right to “petition government for redress of grievance.”¹¹ This has formed two distinct protections, each of which immunizes lobbying activity: *Noerr-Pennington*¹² and official proceeding immunity.¹³

A. *The Noerr-Pennington Doctrine and Free Speech in Politics*

The right to petition was first protected from tort liability in business cases alleging that defendant-induced government action

9. See, e.g., David Lazarus, *PG&E Cast as Villain in New ‘True-Story’ Movie*, S.F. CHRONICLE, March 16, 2000, at A-1.

10. See *infra* Part II.A.2.

11. U.S. CONST. amend. I; CAL. CONST. art. I, § 3. This paper focuses on federal and California law because the author is a California lawyer. Because other jurisdictions have similar protections for free speech, however, the principles discussed here should have general application, and decisions from other jurisdiction will be cited for that reason.

12. See *infra* Part II.A.

13. See *infra* Part II.B.

harméd its plaintiff competitor.¹⁴ In *Eastern Railroad President's Conference v. Noerr Motor Freight*, multiple trucking companies and trade associations brought suit against their railroad counterparts, alleging that the railroads had conspired to monopolize the long-distance freight for themselves to the exclusion of truckers. "The gist of the conspiracy alleged was that the railroads had . . . conduct[ed] a publicity campaign against the truckers designed to foster the adoption and retention of laws and law enforcement practices destructive of the trucking business," a practice the complaint described as "vicious, corrupt, and fraudulent."¹⁵ Although defendants alleged a similar counter-claim against the truckers, the trial court found that only the railroads' campaign had violated the Sherman Act. While it "disclaim[ed] . . . any purpose to condemn as illegal mere efforts on the part of the railroads to influence the passage of new legislation or the enforcement of existing law," the trial court, nonetheless, found tort liability. This was because the railroads' campaign had a maliciously anti-competitive purpose in that their "deceiving of [the] authorities [was done] to bring about the destruction of the truckers as competitors."¹⁶ Because the publicity campaign had sought "the destruction of the truckers' goodwill, among both the general public and the truckers' existing customers," the trial court also found that the railroads' campaign "injured the truckers in ways unrelated to the passage or enforcement of law."

A unanimous Supreme Court reversed the trial court, finding the alleged conduct to be protected by the right to petition afforded by the First Amendment. It began by underscoring the importance of guarding "the ability of the people to make their wishes known to their representatives," which is both necessary to a representative democracy and guaranteed by the First Amendment.¹⁷ Against this backdrop the Court chastised the trial court's reliance on the railroads' malicious intent: "[t]he right of the people to inform their representatives in

14. See *Noerr Motor Freight*, 365 U.S. 127, 131 (1961). While *Noerr Motor Freight* was decided before the emergence of modern toxic torts, its rules have endured and have been extended. See, e.g., *infra* Part II.A. Its precise holding has become even more relevant recently because its facts, specifically those involving publicity campaigns, have become common in modern times.

15. *Noerr Motor Freight*, 365 U.S. at 129-30.

16. Plaintiffs alleged and offered evidence that the railroads used the "third-party technique" of having seemingly independent persons and civic groups make statements critical of the trucking industry, "when, in fact, it was largely prepared and produced by [the railroads' public relations firm] and paid for by the railroads." *Id.* at 129-30.

17. *Id.* at 132 ("In a representative democracy such as this, these branches of government act on behalf of the people and, to a very large extent, the whole concept of representation depends upon the ability of the people to make their wishes known to their representatives.").

government of their desires with respect to the passage or enforcement of laws cannot properly be made to depend upon their intent in doing so.”¹⁸ So while the railroads’ fraudulent communications may have fallen “far short of the ethical standards generally approved in this country . . . [i]t does not follow . . . that the use of the technique in a publicity campaign designed to influence governmental action constitutes a violation of the Sherman Act.”¹⁹

Furthermore, despite the fact that the publicity campaign’s “[c]irculars, speeches, newspaper articles, editorials, magazine articles, [and] memoranda” were not exclusively directed at government officials, these communications still enjoyed the protection of the immunity. This “mean[t] no more than that the truckers sustained some direct injury as an incidental effect of the railroads’ campaign to influence governmental action and that the railroads were hopeful that this might happen.” Since incidental influence inevitably results from efforts to influence government behavior, it could not itself make a campaign illegal.²⁰

In 1972, the Supreme Court extended *Noerr Motor Freight’s* holding to cover “the approach of citizens . . . to administrative agencies . . . and to courts.”²¹ Currently, it protects attempts to influence the legislature,²² any federal, state or local regulatory agencies,²³ the executive branch²⁴ and the state and federal courts²⁵ by conduct or communication.²⁶ Its application does not depend on the speech fitting within a particular category.²⁷ Speech or conduct is protected even if it has a commercial or unabashedly self-interested purpose “as long as the intent is genuinely to induce government action rather than to frustrate or

18. *Id.* at 137-38. This same issue of intent arose five years later. *See United Mine Workers v. Pennington*, 381 U.S. 657, 670 (1965) (instructing the jury that defendants’ “approach to the Secretary of Labor was legal unless [it was] part of a conspiracy to drive small operators out of business”). Based on its holding in *Noerr Motor Freight*, the Supreme Court reversed, thus giving rise to the term *Noerr-Pennington* immunity. *Id.*

19. *Noerr Motor Freight*, 365 U.S. at 140.

20. *Id.* at 143-44.

21. *Cal. Motor Transp. Co. v. Trucking Unlimited*, 404 U.S. 508, 510 (1972).

22. *See Noerr Motor Freight*, 365 U.S. at 144-45.

23. *See King v. Borges*, 28 Cal. App. 3d 27, 34 (Ct. App. 1972).

24. *See United Mine Workers*, 381 U.S. at 670.

25. *See Hi-Top Steel Corp. v. Lehrer*, 24 Cal. App. 4th 570, 576 (Ct. App. 1994) (“[T]he *Noerr-Pennington* doctrine applies in administrative and judicial as well as legislative contexts.”).

26. *See Premier Med. Mgmt. Sys., Inc. v. Cal. Ins. Guarantee Assn.*, 136 Cal. App. 4th 464, 479 (Ct. App. 2006) (applying *Noerr-Pennington* protection to claims for RICO and negligent misrepresentation).

27. *See Ludwig v. Super. Ct.*, 37 Cal. App. 4th 8, 21-22 (Ct. App. 1995) (holding that the right to petition “unquestionably applies to commercial speech and competitive activity—even *anticompetitive* activity”).

deter a third party simply by the use of the governmental process.”²⁸ Qualifying communications are absolutely immune from tort liability²⁹ and from any cause of action³⁰ except malicious prosecution,³¹ libel and slander,³² which already incorporate First Amendment protections within their elements.

1. The Sham Exception: Sensibly Denying Immunity to Disinterested Petitioners

The only well-defined exception to *Noerr-Pennington* immunity is for sham petitions. First mentioned in *Noerr Motor Freight*³³ and

28. *Id.* at 22.

29. *See* Mann v. Quality Old Time Serv., Inc., 120 Cal. App. 4th 90, 108 (Ct. App. 2004); Pac. Gas & Elec. Co. v. Bear Stearns & Co., 50 Cal. 3d 1118, 1134 (1990) (“[T]he *Noerr-Pennington* doctrine suggests that the right to petition is of such paramount stature that it would prohibit tort liability in the absence of some claim that the petition was a sham.”); Ludwig, 37 Cal. App. 4th at 21-22 (quoting Real Estate Investors v. Columbia Pictures Indus., 508 U.S. 49, 56 (1993) (“Those who petition the government are generally immune from . . . liability.”)).

30. *See* Hi-Top Steel Corp., 24 Cal. App. 4th at 577-78 (“[T]he principle of constitutional law that bars litigation arising from injuries received as a consequence of First Amendment petitioning activity [should be applied], regardless of the underlying cause of action asserted by the plaintiffs. [T]o hold otherwise would effectively chill the defendants’ First Amendment rights.” (citations omitted)).

31. *See* Padres L.P. v. Henderson, 114 Cal. App. 4th 495, 597 (Ct. App. 2003) (holding that *Noerr-Pennington* does not preclude a claim for malicious prosecution because “as with the sham exception to the *Noerr-Pennington* doctrine, malicious prosecution permits recovery only for petitioning activity that is shown to be both frivolous and malicious”); *see also* Pac. Gas & Elec. Co., 50 Cal. 3d at 1135 (“Although this court has not spoken on the precise issue, we have been guided by the constitutional right to petition for relief of grievances in interpreting the reach of the cause of action for malicious prosecution.”); Porous Media Corp. v. Pall Corp., 186 F.3d 1077, 1080 (8th Cir. 1999) (“The *Noerr-Pennington* framework essentially mirrors the first two elements of malicious prosecution under Minnesota law. A lawsuit lacking in probable cause and pursued without a reasonable belief of possible success is simply an objectively baseless or ‘sham’ lawsuit, and a lawsuit brought with malicious intent is one that is subjectively motivated by bad faith.”); Hydranautics v. FilmTec Corp., 70 F.3d 533, 536-37 (9th Cir. 1995) (“The antitrust claim attacks the patent infringement lawsuit itself as the wrong which furnishes the basis for antitrust damages. This is somewhat analogous to a civil claim for malicious prosecution.”).

32. *See* McDonald v. Smith, 472 U.S. 479, 481 (1985) (holding that *Noerr-Pennington* immunity prevents a libel claim by a government official because the elements of libel already incorporate First Amendment protection).

33. *See* E. R.R. Pres. Conf. v. Noerr Motor Freight, 365 U.S. 127, 144 (1961). (“There may be situations in which a publicity campaign, ostensibly directed toward influencing governmental action, is a mere sham to cover what is actually nothing more than an attempt to interfere directly with the business relationships of a competitor and the application of the Sherman Act would be justified. But this certainly is not the case here. No one denies that the railroads were making a genuine effort to influence legislation and law enforcement practices.”).

subsequently fleshed out³⁴ and applied in California,³⁵ it is not so much a true exception as an argument that the petitioner who does not genuinely seek to influence government action never qualifies for immunity initially.³⁶ To invoke it, a party challenging immunity must generally show that the petition was undertaken without any real hope of securing favorable government action and that the petition was objectively baseless.³⁷ It is a difficult burden to meet,³⁸ particularly when the defendant is successful in securing favorable government action.³⁹ Since toxic tort plaintiffs would generally attempt to fault the defendant for securing favorable government action—whether it is a less expensive remediation or a higher permissible level of a given chemical in drinking water, known as the Maximum Contaminant Level (“MCL”)—a pure sham exception is unlikely to apply.⁴⁰

34. See *Cal. Motor Transp. Co. v. Trucking Unlimited*, 404 U.S. 508, 511 (1972) (finding that allegations of conduct intended to “to harass and deter respondents in their use of administrative and judicial proceedings,” rather than to influence government action, would not be prohibited by the *Noerr-Pennington* doctrine).

35. See *Hi-Top Steel Corp.*, 24 Cal. App. 4th at 579 (“[W]e see no impediment to applying the sham exception in California; it is not inconsistent with the California Constitution. Additionally, there is no reason not to apply it; defendants should not be protected from liability for their torts if they are not engaged in a genuine exercise of their constitutional rights but merely [a] ‘shamming’ exercise of those rights in order to injure their competitors.”).

36. See *id.* at 578 (“The sham exception . . . reflects a judicial recognition that not all activity that appears as an effort to influence government is actually an exercise of the [F]irst [A]mendment right to petition. At times this activity, disguised as petitioning, is simply an effort to interfere directly with a competitor. In that case, the ‘sham’ petitioning activity is not entitled to [F]irst [A]mendment protection, *because it is not an exercise of [F]irst [A]mendment rights.*” (quoting *Clipper Express v. Rocky Mountain Motor Tariff Bureau, Inc.*, 690 F.2d 1240, 1255 (9th Cir. 1982))); *City of Columbia v. Omni Outdoor Adver., Inc.*, 499 U.S. 365, 380 (1991) (recognizing that the sham exception “encompasses situations in which persons use the governmental *process*—as opposed to the *outcome* of that process—as an anticompetitive weapon”).

37. See *Ludwig v. Super. Ct.*, 37 Cal. App. 4th 8, 22 (Ct. App. 1995). *Ludwig* applied the refined sham pleading exception set forth in *Prof'l Real Estate Investors v. Columbia Pictures Indus.*, 508 U.S. 49, 61 (1993), to tort immunity under California’s anti-SLAPP statute.

38. See *Ludwig*, 37 Cal. App. 4th at 22 (stating that a plaintiff must show “that no reasonable person could have expected the action taken to lead to governmental results”).

39. See *Gallegos v. Pac. Lumber Co.*, 158 Cal. App. 4th 950, 966 (Ct. App. 2008) (noting that defendant “achieved the very outcome it petitioned for” in finding that the sham exception did not apply).

40. See *id.*; see also *infra* Part III.

2. The Fraud Exception: Blurring the Bounds of Petition Immunity

“The trouble with privileges is that they are granted to good and bad alike.”⁴¹ This has proven the case with *Noerr-Pennington* immunity, and the temptation to strip immunity from “bad” petitions genuinely meant to influence government action has proven irresistible for some courts. Consequently, in addition to the sham exception, there exists a “fraud exception,”⁴² which can sometimes defeat immunity when the petition involves misrepresentations in judicial or administrative proceedings.⁴³ Originally offered as an outgrowth of the sham exception, the fraud exception has differentiated from its roots such that a deceptive, yet genuine petition can under certain circumstances lose its protection.

The fraud exception arguably began⁴⁴ with *California Motor Transport Company v. Trucking Unlimited*⁴⁵ when the Supreme Court drew an illustrative distinction between false statements in the political and judicial arenas, stating that “[m]isrepresentations, condoned in the political arena, are not immunized when used in the adjudicatory process” and that “actions of that kind cannot acquire immunity by seeking refuge under the umbrella of ‘political expression.’”⁴⁶ From then until the Supreme Court’s 1993 decision in *Professional Real Estate Investors v. Columbia Pictures Industries*,⁴⁷ it seemed settled that allegations of fraud, at least in the judicial context, defeated petition

41. *Hawkins v. Harris*, 661 A.2d 284, 287 (N.J. 1995) (discussing litigation privilege).

42. See Daniel Davis, Comment, *The Fraud Exception to the Noerr-Pennington Doctrine in Judicial and Administrative Proceedings*, 69 U. CHI. L. REV. 325, 334 (2002); *Balt. Scrap Corp. v. David J. Joseph Co.*, 81 F. Supp. 2d 602, 616 (D. Md. 2000).

43. See *Kottle v. N.W. Kidney Ctrs.*, 146 F.3d 1056, 1061 (9th Cir. 1998) (applying the fraud exception to misrepresentations made to the Washington Department of Health).

44. Before the emergence of the fraud exception, the sham exception was often expansively applied to remove immunity from disagreeable conduct. See Marina Loa, *Reforming the Noerr-Pennington Antitrust Immunity Doctrine*, 55 RUTGERS L. REV. 965, 967 (2003) (“This malleable sham concept often became a catchall for whatever petitioning methods courts deemed improper and unworthy of antitrust immunity, even when the petitioner was genuinely seeking to persuade the government.”); see also Stanley E. Crawford, Jr. & Andy A. Tschoepe, II, *The Erosion of the Noerr Pennington Immunity*, 13 ST. MARY’S L.J. 291, 326 (1981) (reviewing the expansion of the sham exception).

45. *Cal. Motor Transp. Co. v. Trucking Unlimited*, 404 U.S. 508 (1972).

46. *Id.* at 513.

47. *Prof’l Real Estate Investors v. Columbia Pictures Indus.*, 508 U.S. 49 (1993).

immunity.⁴⁸ However, the Supreme Court implied that the issue remained open,⁴⁹ but offered no guidance.

The Ninth Circuit decision in *Liberty Lake Investments v. Magnuson*⁵⁰ formulated the currently existing fraud exception, although it initially used fraud on the part of the petitioner as a means of establishing a sham, and not as a stand-alone exception. In *Liberty Lake*, a commercial property owner, frustrated with constant, “community” environmental challenges to his proposed developments, alleged that his competitor had been instigating the challenges and sued the competitor in anti-trust.⁵¹ The Ninth Circuit began by citing one of its prior opinions, *Columbia Pictures Industries v. Professional Real Estate Investors*,⁵² for the sham exception’s criteria that the underlying suit be both “objectively baseless” and not intended to influence government action. The freshly decided *Professional Real Estate Investors*, it observed, had adopted “a similar, two-part test for the sham litigation exception to *Noerr-Pennington*.”⁵³ Then, after deciding that the sham exception did not apply because defendant’s action “was not so objectively baseless that no reasonable litigant could realistically expect success on the merits,” it addressed plaintiff’s argument that an abuse of process—including defendant’s using straw parties for the litigation—constituted an alternative justification for imposing the sham exception.

The Ninth Circuit agreed it might. A footnote in *Professional Real Estate Investors*, reserving the fraud exception, cited the 1965 *Walker Process Equipment, Inc. v. Food Machinery & Chemical Corp.*⁵⁴ patent case. *Walker Process Equipment* held that, without any consideration of petition immunity, a defendant could be liable in anti-trust when it sued its competitors for infringement of a patent that defendant had “procured by [intentional] fraud on the Patent Office.”⁵⁵ The court in *Liberty Lake* read *Professional Real Estate Investors*’ reservation and citation to *Walker Process* together as leaving open the possibility that “a party’s knowing fraud upon, or its intentional misrepresentations to the court

48. See *supra* notes 31-35.

49. See *Prof’l Real Estate Investors*, 508 U.S. at 61 (“We need not decide here whether and, if so, to what extent *Noerr* permits the imposition of antitrust liability for a litigant’s fraud or other misrepresentations.”).

50. *Liberty Lake Invs. v. Magnuson*, 12 F.3d 155 (9th Cir. 1993).

51. See *id.* at 156.

52. *Columbia Pictures Indus. v. Prof’l Real Estate Investors, Inc.*, 944 F.2d 1525 (9th Cir. 1991).

53. *Liberty Lake*, 12 F.3d at 157.

54. See *Walker Process Equip., Inc. v. Food Machinery & Chem. Corp.*, 382 U.S. 172, 174 (1965).

55. See *id.*; *Prof’l Real Estate Investors*, 508 U.S. at 61.

deprive the litigation of its legitimacy” so as to defeat immunity without meeting the sham exception’s two prong test.⁵⁶

Two years later, in *Hydranautics v. FilmTec Corp.*, the possibility of a stand-alone fraud exception became an accepted alternative test.⁵⁷ Soon other circuits and state courts followed by holding that fraud in the judicial context, if it was serious enough, could defeat immunity regardless of whether the petitioner subjectively intended to prompt government action.⁵⁸ There is currently a split between the circuits: the Ninth and D.C. Circuits recognize the fraud exception, while the Third and Federal Circuits⁵⁹ as well as California⁶⁰ have criticized and rejected it.

56. *Liberty Lake*, 12 F.3d at 159.

57. *See Hydranautics v. FilmTec Corp.*, 70 F.3d 533, 538 (9th Cir. 1995) (“We now are faced with deciding whether the dictum in *Liberty Lake* is good law, and we conclude that it is, at least where the fraud is intentional, not ‘technical fraud.’”); *Kottle v. N.W. Kidney Ctrs.*, 146 F.3d 1056, 1056 (9th Cir. 1998) (“In the context of a judicial proceeding, if the alleged anticompetitive behavior consists of making intentional misrepresentations to the court, litigation can be deemed a sham if ‘a party’s knowing fraud upon, or its intentional misrepresentations to, the court deprive the litigation of its legitimacy.’” (quoting *Liberty Lake*, 12 F.3d at 150)).

58. *See Whelan v. Abell*, 48 F.3d 1247, 1259-60 (D.C. Cir. 1995) (disallowing a *Noerr-Pennington* defense in an action for common law torts when the defendants made material misrepresentations to state securities regulators); *see also Balt. Scrap Corp. v. David J. Joseph Co.*, 81 F. Supp. 2d 602, 616-17 (D. Md. 2000) (adopting *Liberty Lake*’s rendition of the fraud exception); *Carolinas Cement Co. v. Riverton Inv. Corp.*, 53 Va. Cir. 69, 73 (Cir. Ct. 2000) (following *Liberty Lake* such that “intentional misrepresentations to either this Court or to the Board of Zoning Appeals (BZA) would not be protected by the *Noerr-Pennington* doctrine”); *Gunderson v. Univ. of Ala.*, 902 P.2d 323, 329 (Alaska 1995) (“We find the Ninth Circuit’s reading of *Columbia Pictures* persuasive. Allegations of fraud and misrepresentation in the judicial process will only block *Noerr-Pennington* immunity when such allegations go ‘to the core of a lawsuit’s legitimacy.’”); *St. Joseph’s Hosp., Inc. v. Hosp. Corp. of America*, 795 F.2d 948, 955 (11th Cir. 1986) (“The plaintiff here has alleged misrepresentations before a governmental agency. When a governmental agency such as SHPA is passing on specific certificate applications it is acting judicially. Misrepresentations under these circumstances do not enjoy *Noerr* immunity.”). *But see Lockheed Martin Corp. v. Boeing Co.*, No. 6:03-cv-796-Orl-28KRS, 2005 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 15365, at *6-7 (M.D. Fla. Mar. 21, 2005) (applying the fraud exception, but noting that the Supreme Court’s decision in *Columbia v. Omni Outdoor Adver.*, 499 U.S. 365 (1991) “arguably casts doubt on the continued viability of *St. Joseph’s*”); *Potters Med. Ctr. v. City Hosp. Assoc.*, 800 F.2d 568, 580 (6th Cir. 1986) (“[T]he knowing and willful submission of false facts to a government agency falls within the sham exception to the *Noerr-Pennington* doctrine.”).

59. *See Armstrong Surgical Ctr., Inc. v. Armstrong County Mem’l Hosp.*, 185 F.3d 154, 169 (3d Cir. 1999) (criticizing *Kottle* and holding that judicial misrepresentations do not fall within the sham exception to *Noerr-Pennington*); *see also Omni Outdoor Adver.*, 499 U.S. at 381-82 (“California Motor Transport involved a context in which the conspirators’ participation in the governmental process was itself claimed to be a ‘sham,’ employed as a means of imposing cost and delay . . . [t]he holding of the case is limited to that situation.”); *Cheminor Drugs, Ltd. v. Ethyl Corp.*, 168 F.3d 119, 123 (3d Cir. 1999) (responding to the argument that “*Noerr-Pennington* immunity does not apply at all

Because of the statement in *California Motor Transport* that “misrepresentations, condoned in the political arena, are not immunized when used in the adjudicatory process,”⁶¹ courts that accept the fraud exception only apply it if the fraudulent petition was made in an “adjudicatory process.” Whether a proceeding is adjudicatory is a relative inquiry that depends on whether the challenged proceedings more resemble litigation or politics.⁶² This, in turn, depends on the extent to which the official’s discretion is constrained by rule or statute:⁶³ the greater the discretion, the more likely the proceeding is to be political, while the proscribed and regimented decision is more likely from a judicial process.⁶⁴ Petitioning State Department officials,⁶⁵ a local permitting board and a redevelopment agency⁶⁶ have been considered political, while petitioning the Securities and Exchange Commission,⁶⁷ the Federal Maritime Administration⁶⁸ and the Patent and Trademark Office have been deemed judicial processes in which the fraud exception could apply.⁶⁹

Although an individualized determination affecting only the petitioner, such as a contested decision on a Notice of Violation, could potentially be considered judicial, most of the site-specific lobbying that a toxic tort plaintiff might seek to turn against a defendant is likely to be political. There are two reasons for this. First, to be useful to a plaintiff, the proceeding must affect the community—arguably the subject of all political speech.⁷⁰ Second, environmental investigation and remediation proceedings often involve community outreach, public participation and

to petitions containing misrepresentations” by stating “[w]e decline to carve out a new exception to the broad immunity that Noerr-Pennington provides”); *Nobelpharma AB v. Implant Innovations, Inc.*, 141 F.3d 1059, 1071 (Fed. Cir. 1998) (reversing the district court’s reliance on the fraud exception because the *Professional Real Estate* sham exception and the *Walker Process* rule of not immunizing suits based on fraudulently obtained patents need not be merged).

60. See *Gallegos v. Pac. Lumber Co.*, 158 Cal. App. 4th 950, 966 (Ct. App. 2008).

61. *Cal. Motor Transp. Co. v. Trucking Unlimited*, 404 U.S. 508, 513 (1972).

62. See *Kottle v. N.W. Kidney Ctrs.*, 146 F.3d 1056, 1061 (9th Cir. 1998) (“[T]his circuit has generally shaped the sham exception according to our estimation of whether the executive entity in question more resembled a judicial body, or more resembled a political entity.”).

63. See *id.* at 1062.

64. See *id.*

65. See *Amarel v. Connell*, 102 F.3d 1494, 1520 (9th Cir. 1996).

66. See *Boone v. Redev. Agency of San Jose*, 841 F.2d 886, 896 (9th Cir. 1988).

67. See *Whelan v. Abell*, 48 F.3d 1247, 1255 (D.C. Cir. 1995).

68. See *Assigned Container Ship Claims, Inc. v. Am. President Lines, Ltd.*, 784 F.2d 1420, 1421 (9th Cir. 1986).

69. See *Hydranautics v. Filmtec Corp.*, 70 F.3d 533, 538 (9th Cir. 1995).

70. See *Boone*, 841 F.2d at 896 (noting that “a redevelopment plan and its amendments obviously involve a large area and affects virtually every member of the community,” in finding that the fraud exception did not apply).

coordination with elected officials.⁷¹ Again, the broad input points toward a political proceeding. More specifically, legislative lobbying is, by definition, political and so it should never be subject to a fraud exception.

Courts employing the fraud exception generally build in procedural safeguards and set the materiality bar high for the alleged misrepresentation.⁷² As a result, the circumstances under which the fraud exception could properly support a judgment based on a defendant's petitioning are limited. Even so, the two fact-specific tests that determine whether the fraud exception applies, whether the fraud is so material as to deprive the litigation of its legitimacy and whether the proceeding is judicial,⁷³ leave the immunity for many petitions uncertain.

Also noteworthy, when the fraud exception to *Noerr-Pennington*, as defined by most courts that recognize it, is applied to toxic torts, most site-specific lobbying and all legislative lobbying should fall outside of the exception; therefore, these instances should be immune from liability. Nevertheless, as will be illustrated later, this is not always the case.⁷⁴

B. *Official Proceeding Immunity*

In addition to *Noerr-Pennington* immunity, forty-eight states have litigation or "official proceeding" privileges of varying scopes to protect participants in truth-seeking proceedings.⁷⁵ Six states use statutes to immunize any statement made in a "legislative or judicial proceeding or

71. See, e.g., CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF TOXIC SUBSTANCES CONTROL, PUBLIC PARTICIPATION MANUAL, CHAPTER 2: OVERVIEW OF THE PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROGRAM 3 (2001), available at http://www.dtsc.ca.gov/LawsRegsPolicies/Policies/PPP/upload/OEA_Pol_PublicParticipationManual_Chapter2.pdf; see also *infra* Part V.C. (discussing CERCLA public participation provisions).

72. See *Balt. Scrap Corp. v. David J. Joseph Co.*, 237 F.3d 394, 404 (4th Cir. 2001) ("A broad fraud exception would allow federal collateral litigation over conduct in state courts that never affected the core of a state judgment.").

73. At least one district court, *Warner Lambert Co. v. Purepac Pharm. Co.*, No. 98-02749, 2000 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 22559 (D.N.J. Dec. 20, 2000), has added yet another inquiry by holding that immunity depends on whether the agency in question performs independent verification of information submitted. *Id.* at *19-20.

74. See *Frances Misukonis v. Atl. Richfield Co.*, No. 01-L-1472 (3d Cir. Apr. 3, 2002); see also *infra* Part III.B.

75. See T. Leigh Anenson, *Absolute Immunity from Civil Liability: Lessons for Litigation Lawyers*, 31 PEPP. L. REV. 915, 917 (2004).

in any other official proceeding authorized by law,”⁷⁶ while the remaining forty-two states rely on case law for their litigation privilege.⁷⁷

The official proceeding privilege extends to all “truth[-]seeking” inquiries—even external communications designed to spur an agency to action.⁷⁸ Furthermore, unlike *Noerr-Pennington*, in many jurisdictions,⁷⁹ the immunity is without exception.⁸⁰ Although initially addressed to claims of defamation, official proceeding immunity guards against “virtually all other torts”⁸¹ and cannot be avoided by packaging the allegations in a parasitic cause of action such as unfair competition.⁸²

Cases apply this immunity broadly, both in terms of the types of proceedings covered and the statements protected. It applies to any official “truth-seeking inquiries,”⁸³ including local city council and city planning commission proceedings,⁸⁴ statements made in or relating to environmental impact proceedings⁸⁵ and reports of alleged theft to law

76. CAL. CIV. CODE § 47(b) (West 1982); MONT. CODE ANN. § 27-1-804(2) (2007); N.D. CENT. CODE § 14-02-05(2) (2007); OKLA. STAT. ANN. tit. 12, § 1443.1 (West 1981); OKLA. STAT. ANN. tit. 21, § 772 (West 2002); S.D. CODIFIED LAWS § 20-11-5(2) (2008); UTAH CODE ANN. § 45-2-3(2) (West 2008).

77. *See, e.g., Hawkins v. Harris*, 141 N.J. 207, 213 (1995) (“A statement made in the course of judicial, administrative, or legislative proceedings is absolutely privileged and wholly immune from liability. That immunity is predicated on the need for unfettered expression critical to advancing the underlying government interest at stake in those settings.”).

78. *See King v. Borges*, 28 Cal. App. 3d 27, 34 (Ct. App. 1972).

79. Jurisdictions vary on whether an absolute or qualified privilege applies to extra-judicial and extra-legislative communications, such as those to law enforcement to initiate a proceeding. Most jurisdictions give a qualified privilege. *See Fridovich v. Fridovich*, 598 So. 2d 65, 67 (Fla. 1992) (surveying jurisdictions and stating that “it appears that a majority of states that have addressed this issue have embraced a qualified privilege”). Other courts hold this privilege to be absolute. *See, e.g., Williams v. Taylor*, 129 Cal. App. 3d 745, 753 (Ct. App. 1982).

80. Section 47.5 does create an exception to the immunity imparted by section 47(b). *See* CAL. CIV. CODE § 47.5. However, it only applies to a peace officer bringing a defamation action against an individual who files false charges with the officer’s employing agency. *See id.* The tort of malicious prosecution could also be considered an exception to section 47(b). *See, e.g., Crowley v. Katleman*, 8 Cal. 4th 666, 695 (1994) (holding that it is “well settled . . . that the litigation privilege does not apply to the tort of malicious prosecution”).

81. *Crowley*, 8 Cal. 4th at 695.

82. *See Cel-Tech Commc’n, Inc. v. Los Angeles Cellular Tel. Co.*, 20 Cal. 4th 163, 182 (1999) (“Plaintiff may thus not plead around an absolute bar to relief [of section 47] simply by recasting the cause of action as one for unfair competition.” (internal quotations omitted)).

83. *Crowley*, 8 Cal. 4th at 695.

84. *See Cayley v. Nunn*, 190 Cal. App. 3d 300, 303-04 (Ct. App. 1987).

85. *See Gallegos v. Pac. Lumber Co.*, 158 Cal. App. 4th 950, 958 (Ct. App. 2008); *Mission Oaks Ranch, Ltd. v. County of Santa Barbara*, 65 Cal. App. 4th 713, 727 (Ct. App. 1998) (overruled on other grounds); *Briggs v. Eden Council For Hope & Opportunity*, 19 Cal. App. 4th 1106, 1123 (Ct. App. 1999).

enforcement.⁸⁶ There has not yet been a case that has decided whether agency oversight of an environmental investigation or remediation constitutes an “official proceeding.” However, at least in California, it is almost certain that the abovementioned instances would constitute “official proceedings” because these proceedings are similar to environmental impact proceedings where the litigation privilege has been applied.⁸⁷

III. Lobbying Allegations in Toxic Torts

Toxic tort plaintiffs commonly allege liability for site-specific lobbying.⁸⁸ For example, it is routinely claimed that toxic tort defendants misled the public when they denied responsibility for, or downplayed the risk of, environmental contamination when communicating with agencies. One article by a toxic tort plaintiff practitioner, for example, cites “an important trend in pollution cases, to plead fraud where the polluter has manipulated its system to the detriment of its neighbors who or which have been waiting for cleanup.”⁸⁹ While such claims fall squarely within the protections of *Noerr-Pennington* and official proceeding immunity, courts and counsel often miss the issue entirely, or they fail to recognize the scope of protection afforded to such activities. In *Boughton v. Cotter Corp.*,⁹⁰ toxic tort plaintiffs sought to depose defendant’s counsel regarding allegedly false statements he “made to the public, the media, and various governmental agencies with regard to the construction, licensing, operation and environmental impact of the [defendant’s uranium] [] mill.” Plaintiffs argued that such conduct was fraudulent and “was essential to their claims for punitive damages;”

86. See *Williams v. Taylor*, 129 Cal. App. 3d 745, 753 (Ct. App. 1982) (holding, consistent with *Noerr-Pennington*, that the section 47(b) immunity could not be overcome by a showing of malice).

87. See 42 U.S.C. § 9604(b) (2008).

88. See *Quemado v. Exxon Mobile Corp.*, No. Civ.A.DR-03-CA-19-OG, 2005 WL 3591912, at *4 (W.D. Tex. March 31, 2005) (plaintiff alleging in this toxic tort case that defendant “had prior knowledge of leaks in the UST systems and actively concealed their knowledge, and that such conduct constitutes fraud and/or negligent misrepresentation”); *Town of Bolton v. Chevron Oil Co.*, 919 So. 2d 1101, 1103 (Miss. Ct. App. 2005) (plaintiffs claiming that “[t]he landowners further alleged that Chevron had willfully concealed the harmful effects of TENORM from the landowners, the public, and regulatory authorities, which amounted to fraud, fraudulent concealment, and fraudulent misrepresentation”); *Gates v. Rohm & Haas Co.*, No. 06-CV-01743 (E.D. Pa. filed Apr. 25, 2006) (plaintiffs alleging that “[d]efendants also intentionally misrepresented the true extent of the groundwater plum in their submissions to the IEPA”); *Baker v. Chevron USA Inc.*, No. 05-227 (S.D. Ohio filed Feb. 11, 2006) (involving fraud on agency allegations in case claiming injury from gasoline contamination of groundwater).

89. Allan Kanner, *Toxic Tort Litigation in a Regulatory World*, 41 WASHBURN L.J. 535, 547 (2002).

90. *Boughton v. Cotter Corp.*, 65 F.3d 823 (10th Cir. 1995).

however, despite the obvious *Noerr-Pennington* issue, the court denied the request without mentioning the right to petition.⁹¹

Given that toxic torts often ride on the coattails of environmental investigations or remediation, there is generally ample site-specific lobbying for a toxic tort plaintiff to choose from.⁹² A voluminous file, much of which would qualify as petitions, will accompany most sites. Even when the toxic tort precedes site characterization and remediation operations, there will be routine inspections by any number of regulatory agencies, whether under RCRA,⁹³ CERCLA,⁹⁴ the Clean Water Act,⁹⁵ the Clean Air Act⁹⁶ or by local agencies, ranging from fire departments to regional water quality control boards.⁹⁷ In all but the rarest instances, the agencies will have issued at least occasional notices of violation, resulting in corresponding negotiations between the agency and company over the remedy or fine.

The more common scenario is that the toxic tort will follow years or decades of environmental investigation and remediation overseen by government agencies.⁹⁸ Investigation and remediation easily could have resulted in hundreds of reports, proposals, assessments, comments, letters, analytical results, records and memoranda being sent to the involved agencies, with many of these documents providing the fodder for an ensuing toxic tort.⁹⁹

A. *Remediation/Compliance Lobbying Allegations in Environmental Toxic Torts*

Companies receiving informational demands as potentially responsible parties (“PRPs”) may initially deny having contaminated

91. *Id.* at 829, 831. Although the Tenth Circuit affirmed the protective order, the *Noerr-Pennington* issue was not raised. *See id.*

92. *See, e.g.,* Gates v. Rohm & Haas Co., No. 06-CV-01743 (E.D. Pa. filed Apr. 25, 2006) (relying on defendant’s agency submissions).

93. *See* Resource Conservation and Recovery Act of 1976, 42 U.S.C. § 6927(a) (1992).

94. *See* Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act of 1980, 42 U.S.C. § 9604(b).

95. *See* 33 U.S.C. § 1318(a) (2008).

96. *See* 42 U.S.C. § 7414(a)(2).

97. *See* SEARCY-ALFORD, *supra* note 8, at § 1.04 (stating that government reports are publicly available and “can be extremely helpful in proving the toxic tort case”).

98. *See id.* (“For example, in a release action, the EPA or a state agency may have investigated to ascertain whether any laws or regulations have been violated, or whether governmental remediation is necessary.”).

99. *See* U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region Six Superfund Program, <http://www.epa.gov/earth1r6/6sf/filestru/nd.htm#39.06:Description> (last visited Aug. 14, 2008) (stating that one of the EPA’s purposes behind its Superfund Document Management System is to “preserve case development materials, such as, affidavits or depositions taken during legal actions for . . . toxic tort suits”).

while attempting to ascertain what happened. After the facts have been ascertained, the PRP may admit a role in the contamination, which unless protected, could be used to raise the inference that the PRP lied in its initial report. Similarly, during the actual investigation or remediation, a PRP's submissions typically contain the company's views on environmental conditions at the site along with favored clean-up plans.¹⁰⁰ Plaintiffs in a follow-on toxic tort suit¹⁰¹ may produce experts who disagree with the PRP's characterizations and proposals and on that basis allege that the PRP was untruthful.

Logically all such communications are protected speech because they seek to "influence governmental action,"¹⁰² and the recent case of *Gallegos v. Pacific Lumber Co.*¹⁰³ comes very close to directly holding so. In *Pacific Lumber Co.*, a county district attorney brought suit against defendant alleging that it submitted false data during "[a]n exhaustive three-year administrative review" under the California Environmental Quality Act ("CEQA") over which the California Department of Forestry and Fire Prevention ("CDF") presided.¹⁰⁴ Plaintiff alleged that defendant's aim was to increase the amount of lumber that CDF would permit it to harvest and, when it did so, ensure decreased environmental mitigation requirements after it sold the subject property to the State. Defendant did submit the corrected data, but plaintiff alleged that the correction was purposefully delayed and misdirected.¹⁰⁵

The court of appeals applied the litigation privilege and *Noerr-Pennington* to affirm the dismissal of the complaint. Because the State's action was premised on "allegedly fraudulent conduct in communicating information to government agencies during the CEQA administrative proceedings," both immunities applied, and plaintiff could pierce neither.¹⁰⁶ Plaintiff's lack of involvement with the underlying CEQA proceedings did not defeat the litigation privilege.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, since it could not be said that "no reasonable litigant could realistically expect success on the merits," when defendant had already succeeded, the sham exception to *Noerr-Pennington* did not apply.¹⁰⁸

100. See *infra* Part V.A.

101. A follow-on suit is a suit brought by other plaintiffs subsequent to the defendant's loss of a similar case.

102. See *E. R.R. Pres. Conf. v. Noerr Motor Freight*, 365 U.S. 127, 140 (1961); *Ludwig v. Super. Ct.*, 37 Cal. App. 4th 8, 21-22 (Ct. App. 1995).

103. See *Gallegos v. Pac. Lumber Co.*, 158 Cal. App. 4th 950, 950 (Ct. App. 2008).

104. See *id.* at 955-56.

105. See *id.* at 956.

106. *Id.* at 958, 964.

107. See *id.* at 960-61.

108. *Id.* at 966, 968 n.9.

For purposes of this analysis, it is irrelevant that this decision was not in the precise context of remediation of contaminants. Whether evaluating the prospective environmental impact of proposed actions under CEQA or proposed actions to mitigate past environmental impacts, the petitions are “[d]esigned to secure approval” from agencies empowered to grant it.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, these petitions come within *Noerr-Pennington* immunity.

The same result follows when defendants have reached a settlement or consent decree with their lead agency prior to the toxic tort lawsuit. These can be complex, sometimes involving the construction of waste treatment facilities¹¹⁰ or a protracted time-frame for remediation,¹¹¹ either of which a toxic tort plaintiff may find attractive for jury presentations. *Noerr-Pennington* would cover a defendant’s actions both in the negotiation of the settlement and its actions pursuant to the settlement. In *Sanders v. Lockyer*,¹¹² a group of smokers sued cigarette manufacturers for entering a Master Settlement Agreement which created a “cartel” that allegedly allowed them to “dramatically increase the price of cigarettes.”¹¹³ The manufacturers moved to dismiss, contending that all efforts to influence the Master Settlement Agreement or its implementing legislation were immunized under the *Noerr-Pennington* doctrine. Plaintiffs agreed that *Noerr-Pennington* covered negotiation of the settlement, but challenged that there was no immunity for acting in accordance with *Noerr-Pennington* in the future.¹¹⁴ The court disagreed, holding that *Noerr-Pennington* immunity would mean nothing if a petitioner “were then subjected to . . . liability for his success [in petitioning].”¹¹⁵ Thus, “the manufacturer defendants are immune from suit for their operation under the settlement agreement and implanting

109. See *Pacific Lumber Co.*, 158 Cal. App. 4th at 965.

110. See, e.g., *Meatpacker Agrees To Pay \$4.1 Million To Settle Claims*, Mealey’s Emerging Toxic Torts, Oct. 19, 2001 (involving a meat packer defendant who agreed to construct additional wastewater treatment facilities as part of a settlement with the EPA).

111. See *New Jersey Dept. of Env’tl. Prot. v. Gloucester Env’tl. Mgmt. Services Inc.*, No. 84-0152, 92-3860, 2005 WL 1129763, at *1 (D.N.J. May 11, 2005) (involving a settlement providing for thirty year remediation of a landfill discharging low-level radionuclide into two municipal water treatment systems).

112. See *Sanders v. Lockyer*, 365 F. Supp. 2d 1093, 1102 (N.D. Cal. 2005).

113. *Id.* at 1096. Plaintiffs sought restitution from defendant manufacturers under California’s Unfair Business Practices statutes, CAL. BUS. & PROF. CODE §§ 17200-17209 (West 2008). See *Sanders*, 365 F. Supp. 2d. at 1097.

114. See *Sanders*, 365 F. Supp. 2d at 1102-03 (“Plaintiff contends that while *Noerr-Pennington* applies to the manufacturers’ activities in negotiating and achieving the MSA, there is no immunity for ‘the subsequent operation of an anticompetitive restraint.’”).

115. *Id.* at 1103 (quoting *Greenwood Utilities Comm’n v. Miss. Power Co.*, 751 F.2d 1484, 1505 (5th Cir. 1985)).

legislation.”¹¹⁶ Logically, the same immunity would protect a toxic tort defendant from allegations of malfeasance either in negotiating an agency settlement or in acting pursuant to one.

B. Legislative Lobbying Allegations in Toxic Torts

Toxic tort plaintiffs sometimes also seek to impose tort liability for a defendant’s legislative lobbying, generally with allegations that the defendant lied to the government by claiming that the substance at issue in its particular toxic tort, such as lead,¹¹⁷ Methyl Tertiary Butyl Ether (“MTBE”),¹¹⁸ wood treatment chemicals,¹¹⁹ breast implants¹²⁰ or a particular pharmaceutical,¹²¹ was less dangerous than the plaintiffs alleged it to be. In *Morgan v. Brush Wellman, Inc.*,¹²² for example, toxic tort plaintiffs alleged that they suffered beryllium sensitivity because defendants “[l]obb[ie]d governmental and international regulatory agencies” and “[e]ngaged in public relations campaigns designed to minimize the perception of beryllium’s toxicity” as part of “a [fifty]-year conspiracy to keep the actual dangers of beryllium exposure secret.”¹²³ The court sustained defendants’ demurrer, but did not address the issue of *Noerr-Pennington* immunity.

116. *Id.*

117. *See City of Phila. v. Lead Indus. Ass’n, Inc.*, 994 F.2d 112, 116 (3d Cir. 1993) (plaintiff alleging that “[t]hrough vigorous lobbying, it also misled legislative bodies considering regulating or banning lead paint. All of the defendants were members of the LIA at some point, though at different times and for different lengths of time”).

118. In an MTBE toxic tort, the court granted an anti-SLAPP motion as to several defendants because “the claims against these defendants were based on their exercise of their right to petition the government as protected by the United States and Maine Constitutions.” *Millett v. Atlantic Richfield Co.*, No. Civ.A. CV-98-555, 2000 WL 359979, at *4 (Me. Super. March 2, 2000). *See Cambria, Calif., Utility Alleges Chevron Concealed Knowledge of MTBE Risks*, Mealey’s Litig. Rep.: MTBE, June 2001 (alleging that defendants participated in a scheme to “conceal the known hazards of MTBE and TBA, and to mislead the public and government agencies to those hazards”).

119. *See Indiana Plaintiffs Allege Wood Preservers Trade Group Misled Regulators About CCA*, Mealey’s Emerging Toxic Torts, July 19, 2002 (alleging that defendant provided false and fraudulent information—namely scientific assessments with which plaintiffs disagreed—to the EPA when the EPA was developing its policy on chromate copper arsenate-treated wood).

120. *See Goldrich v. Natural Y Surgical Specialties*, 25 Cal. App. 4th 772, 782-83 (Ct. App. 1994) (involving a breast implant toxic tort and alleging that defendant misrepresented to the general public that breast implants were safe).

121. *See In re Rezulin Prods. Liab. Litig.*, 309 F. Supp. 2d 531, 548 (S.D.N.Y. 2004) (“Dr. Bell’s report offers extensive commentary on FDA labeling regulations and criticisms of Warner-Lambert’s adherence to those regulations with respect to the Rezulin label. The report is replete also with comments to the effect that Warner-Lambert misled the FDA by providing incomplete or erroneous information.”).

122. *Morgan v. Brush Wellman, Inc.*, 165 F. Supp. 2d 704 (E.D. Tenn. 2001).

123. *Id.* at 719-21.

*Lynn v. Amoco Oil Co.*¹²⁴ is currently the only published decision on point. In *Lynn*, adjacent property owners accused defendant oil companies of conspiracy to avoid cleanup responsibilities for leaking underground storage tanks by, *inter alia*, influencing relevant state regulations and legislation. According to plaintiffs, defendants sought “to enact a remediation scheme . . . which allowed the oil companies to evade cleaning up leaking underground storage tank sites and remediating the consequences of contamination.”¹²⁵ Plaintiffs further alleged that defendants “came together in a group . . . to influence state legislation and regulation that enabled them to reduce or avoid clean-up costs.”¹²⁶ Defendants moved for summary judgment on the grounds that the activities at issue were protected by *Noerr-Pennington*, to which plaintiffs rejoined that *Noerr-Pennington* did not protect defendants’ conduct because their motivation was to save money on remediation.¹²⁷ The court rejected plaintiffs’ distinction, observing that “[c]ommon sense indicates that only rarely will commercial enterprises lobby government for laws or regulations that . . . are not in their commercial interest,” and applied *Noerr-Pennington* to immunize the petitioning activity.¹²⁸

Smith v. Lead Industry Ass’n is another correctly decided *Noerr-Pennington* toxic tort case. In this unpublished Maryland case, six juveniles alleged lead poisoning from household paint against those involved with the paint’s manufacture and sale.¹²⁹ Defendants moved for summary judgment based on plaintiffs’ failure to identify the offending product and produce evidence that defendants’ failure to warn regarding surface preparation caused them any harm. Plaintiffs responded by recasting their claim as one for civil conspiracy, alleging that defendants “used . . . trade associations as vehicles to conspire and conceal the hazards of lead paint.”¹³⁰ Specifically, plaintiffs claimed that defendants “engaged in a [nation-wide] civil conspiracy beginning in the 1940s to avoid warning of the dangers of residential paint health risks,” which included unlawfully influencing the permissible levels of lead.¹³¹

124. *Lynn v. Amoco Oil Co.*, 459 F. Supp. 2d 1175 (N.D. Ala. 2006).

125. *Id.* at 1179-80. Plaintiffs also alleged that defendants made “false public statements regarding the scope of the UST crisis and their response, and [agreed] to fail to notify potentially impacted land owners of conditions at individual sites.” *Id.* at 1179. Thus, the allegations in *Lynn* could be considered site-specific lobbying as well.

126. *Id.*

127. *See id.* at 1177, 1190.

128. *See id.* at 1190.

129. *See Smith v. Lead Indus. Ass’n*, No. 24-C-99-004490, slip op. at 1 (Md. Cir. Nov. 15, 2002).

130. *Id.* at 3.

131. *Id.* at 11, 18.

As proof, plaintiffs offered internal trade association memos and minutes, many of them callous-sounding, discussing the defendants' concerns over existing and proposed lead regulations. An internal memo discussed plans to oppose tougher lead standards because "if similar regulations [to those in California] are adopted in other states they will constitute a burden on the industry."¹³² There were also memos and minutes discussing the "negative publicity on lead poisoning that has affected the paint industry"¹³³ and how it would be best to "pay less attention to the problem of lead poisoning [so] it will soon be forgotten by the public."¹³⁴ Other internal documents stated that:

[L]ead poisoning, or the threat of it . . . means thousands of items of unfavorable publicity every year. This is particularly true since most cases of lead poisoning today are in children, and anything sad that happens to a child is meat for the newspaper editors and is gobbled up by the public. . . . [This] means that we are often subjected to unnecessarily onerous regulations.¹³⁵

The court recognized that the statements were "socially insensitive and if presented to a jury would possibly assist [p]laintiffs in their quest to attach liability to the [d]efendants." However, since the statements were "lobbying efforts by the trade associations that are protected under the First Amendment and the *Noerr-Pennington* doctrine," all were non-actionable.¹³⁶

An unpublished Illinois MTBE decision, *Frances Misukonis v. Atlantic Richfield Co.*, came out incorrectly and illustrates the threat to political speech posed by the fraud exception.¹³⁷ In this case, plaintiffs accused defendants of "concealing the dangers of MTBE . . . from the government" and of making corresponding false statements to Congress and the EPA.¹³⁸ Defendants demurred, correctly invoking petition immunity. However, the trial court strung together citations addressing the fraud exception in the judicial context to hold that "[w]here a group of manufacturers engages in a broad effort to misrepresent and conceal

132. *Id.* at 18-19.

133. *Id.* at 22.

134. *Id.* at 24.

135. *Smith v. Lead Indus. Ass'n*, No. 24-C-99-004490, slip op. at 24-25 (Md. Cir. Nov. 15, 2002).

136. *Id.* at 23, 25.

137. *See Frances Misukonis v. Atl. Richfield Co.*, No. 01-L-1472 (3d Cir. Apr. 3, 2002).

138. *Id.* at 8.

the dangers of their product from . . . the government, they cannot shield this conduct behind an alleged right to petition the government.”¹³⁹

This holding is a rather dramatic example of tort liability being used to deter political speech on a significant social issue. In particular, it illustrates the dangers of a fraud exception, specifically its broad name and poorly defined boundaries being invoked to punish and potentially chill views opposed to the ones espoused by plaintiffs. It is also important to note that MTBE is not unique; in toxic torts, plaintiffs and defendants virtually always disagree on the “dangers” of the substance at issue. Plaintiffs and defendants have differed over silicone’s ability to cause broad autoimmune disease, Bendectin’s teratogenic effect and disease from mold¹⁴⁰ and cell phones,¹⁴¹ and they will continue to do so as new substances become the subjects of toxic tort litigation. It is similarly true that the substances in toxic torts are, as matters of social concern, the subjects of a great deal of political speech. Some will argue that the “dangers” of these substances are high, others will disagree, and regulators or legislators will decide.

Misukonis comes out incorrectly due to loose reasoning. The legislative proceedings at issue in *Misukonis* were unquestionably political. Thus, they could never be subject to a fraud exception even in circuits that recognize such an exception because these circuits apply the exception only to adjudicatory processes.¹⁴² Moreover, the primary case that the court relied upon, *McDonald v. Smith*, is inapplicable outside of defamation actions.¹⁴³ The point, however, is not to criticize an incorrectly decided trial court opinion, but rather to highlight the fact that the fraud exception, being complex, broad, poorly defined and with multiple relativity-based thresholds, is particularly prone to being invoked whenever a toxic tort plaintiff claims that the defendant lied. A malleable exception leads to uncertainty as to the exception’s application, and the result of that, at least for a risk-avoiding defendant, is chilled political speech.

139. *Id.* at 10. *Misukonis* also held that *Noerr-Pennington* did not apply because the conduct was not intended to influence the government. The unpublished order, however, lacks sufficient detail to tell why the court made this statement. *See id.* at 11-12.

140. *See Allison v. Fire Ins. Exch.*, 98 S.W.3d 227, 239 (Tex. App. 2002) (applying the *Daubert* standard to exclude an opinion that exposure to mold caused brain damage). *But see New Haverford P’ship v. Stroot*, 772 A.2d 792, 799 (Del. 2001) (affirming trial court’s acceptance of an opinion that mold caused asthma and cognitive disorders under the *Daubert* standard).

141. *See Reynard v. NEC Corp.*, 887 F. Supp. 1500, 1506 (M.D. Fla. 1995) (discounting expert opinion that magnetic field from cellular phone increased the risk of brain cancer).

142. *See supra* Part II.A.2.

143. *See McDonald v. Smith*, 472 U.S. 479, 479 (1985).

IV. Toxic Tort, Inc. vs. Corporate America: The Two Sides of Toxic Torts and the Implications for Petition Immunity

Although they only gained notoriety with Vietnam's Agent Orange,¹⁴⁴ toxic torts are not new. Their three ingredients—disease, harmful exposures¹⁴⁵ and a system for assigning liability¹⁴⁶ have co-existed since ancient times. Arguably, the Salem Witch Trials, in which the “victims” of exposure to witchcraft attributed a myriad of ailments to defendants' supernatural malfeasants, were the first notable toxic torts in this hemisphere.¹⁴⁷ Even the typical community exposure groundwater toxic tort case can trace its lineage back to at least 1929.¹⁴⁸

Despite such early previews, the modern toxic tort is a relatively recent phenomenon. It is part of a small class of cases that can be characterized as high stakes,¹⁴⁹ lawyer-driven litigation.¹⁵⁰ Given the stakes and resources devoted, as well as the often pre-meditated construction of the lawsuits, the toxic tort defendant can expect far more aggressive discovery and use of indirect prejudicial evidence than that which occurs in ordinary torts. Proponents argue that such a system maximizes the representation of those harmed,¹⁵¹ while detractors fault it

144. See Coffee, *supra* note 7, at 1356.

145. See Jerome O. Nriagu, *Saturnine Gout Among Roman Aristocrats: Did Lead Poisoning Contribute to the Fall of the Empire?*, 308 NEW ENG. J. MED. 660, 660-63 (1983) (discussing Roman use of lead and knowledge of its toxic properties).

146. See Stuart M. Madden, *The Graeco-Roman Antecedents of Modern Tort Law*, 44 BRANDEIS L.J. 865, 882 (2006) (discussing Greco-Roman tort compensation for personal injury victims).

147. The infamous Salem witch trials were not the result of lynch mob action, but were actually formal trials based on testimony given by expert witnesses. See Devereaux v. Abbey, 263 F.3d 1070, 1091 (9th Cir. 2001) (Kleinfeld, J., dissenting). The hunt began when a physician, unable to treat the apparent hysterical symptoms exhibited by a minister's daughter, told the father “that the girl[] ‘w[as] under the evil hand.’” *Id.* The trials were heavy with credentialed experts testifying to “behaviors that the experts had ordained [from experience] to be causally related to witchcraft.” Jane Campbell Moriarty, *Wonders of the Invisible World: Prosecutorial Syndrome and Profile Evidence in the Salem Witchcraft Trials*, 26 VT. L. REV. 43, 44 (2001).

148. See *Pa. R.R. Co. v. Lincoln Trust Co.*, 167 N.E. 721, 724 (Ind. Ct. App. 1929) (alleging that exposure to sewage in drinking water caused typhoid fever); see also *Urie v. Thompson*, 337 U.S. 163, 166, 195 (1949) (involving silica causing silicosis).

149. See Lester Brickman, *Lawyers' Ethics and Fiduciary Obligation in the Brave New World of Aggregative Litigation*, 26 WM. & MARY ENVTL. L. & POL'Y REV. 243, 253 (2001) (observing that, because of the large number of plaintiffs and punitive damages demands, toxic torts frequently present “bet-the-company” scenarios for a defendant).

150. See *supra* p. 35; see also *infra* note 155.

151. See, e.g., Elihu Inselbuch, *Contingent Fees and Tort Reform: A Reassessment and Reality Check*, LAW & CONTEMP. PROBS., Spring/Summer 2001, at 175 (“Many consumer organizations, public advocates, labor unions, and plaintiffs' lawyers view the United States' system of contingent fees as nothing less than the average citizen's ‘key to the courthouse door,’ giving all aggrieved persons access to our system of justice without regard to their financial state. Others, including some defense counsel and academics

for encouraging lucrative (for the lawyers), but often frivolous claims.¹⁵² Regardless of the view to which one subscribes, the modern toxic tort, in the words of one university attorney testifying at a legislative hearing to address the toxicity of chromium six, is “not between David and Goliath but between two Goliaths, both of whom stood a chance to . . . gain hundreds of millions of dollars.”¹⁵³

Toxic torts almost always raise *Noerr-Pennington* issues. The contentions involved, such as the toxicity of a given chemical, are often the subjects of lobbying by both the plaintiff and defendant. Moreover, the associated governmental decisions themselves can sometimes be legitimate evidence in toxic tort cases. This presents plaintiffs with an extra-political opportunity to both shape the evidence in their lawsuits and to advance their own political interests by deterring defendants’ lobbying with the prospect of increased toxic tort liability.

A. *David Becomes Goliath*

In the vast majority of spontaneous torts cases, meaning those where the demand for the lawsuit is not lawyer-generated, the stakes are generally not high enough to give a plaintiff an incentive to develop prejudicial evidence on a defendant’s lobbying activity; thus, no threat to political speech emerges. For example, in a typical car crash case a plaintiff would look to the offending driver, possibly the driver’s employer and the vehicle’s manufacturer as defendants. All defendants may have lobbied in some relevant fashion—the speeding driver perhaps by hypocritically complaining to authorities of other speedy motorists, the employer by commenting on proposed OSHA regulations for drivers and the manufacturer by advocating the safety of its vehicle to regulators. Nevertheless, the stakes of the case, which are not magnified by the economies of scale seen in the toxic tort, do not justify an inquiry into those activities.

funded by or speaking for corporations and their insurers, view them as the bane of our legal system, the source of frivolous and expensive litigation that lines the pockets of the claimants’ lawyers with unwarranted and extravagant fees.”); David A. Root, Note, *Attorney Fee-Shifting in America: Comparing, Contrasting, and Combining the “American Rule” and “English Rule,”* 15 IND. INT’L & COMP. L. REV. 583, 593 (2005).

152. See Paula Batt Wilson, Note, *Attorney Investment in Class Action Litigation: The Agent Orange Example,* 45 CASE W. RES. L. REV. 291, 297 (1994) (“Contingent fees are banned in most foreign countries to avoid frivolous litigation.”).

153. *Possible Interference in the Scientific Review of Chromium VI Toxicity: Informational Hearing Before the S. Heath and Human Services Comm.,* 2003-04 Leg., 98th Sess. 31 (Cal. 2003) (statement of Sen. Deborah Ortiz, Chair, S. Health and Human Services Comm.), available at http://www.sen.ca.gov/ftp/SEN/COMMITTEE/STANDING/HEALTH/_home/CHROMIUM_VI_TRANSCRIPT_02APR03.DOC.

In contrast, toxic torts have the stakes, economies of scale and structure to make the inquiry worthwhile. Since the 1970s, the manner in which toxic torts are formed and litigated has changed dramatically, as have the stakes and corresponding incentives of the lawyers, claimants and defendants involved. Toxic torts have evolved from a variation on the typical personal injury case, where the harm happens to come from a chemical, and develops into sophisticated, lawyer-initiated business ventures¹⁵⁴ akin to large scale securities or class action litigation,¹⁵⁵ fueled by the lure of potentially astronomical pay-outs.¹⁵⁶ For defendants, orchestrated toxic torts can bankrupt even industrial giants.¹⁵⁷ Individual lawsuits often include hundreds of plaintiffs,¹⁵⁸ while in consolidated multi-district litigation the number can be in the tens of thousands.¹⁵⁹ These lawsuits have even gone international with the

154. See MARCIA ANGELL, SCIENCE ON TRIAL: THE CLASH OF MEDICAL EVIDENCE AND LAW IN THE BREAST IMPLANT CASE 203 (1997) (“The practice of paying lawyers contingency fees in tort cases . . . means that plaintiffs’ attorneys can mass-produce lawsuits of very little merit with almost no risk to themselves.”). Commentators generally agree that in mass torts, including class actions, plaintiffs’ attorneys “operate, in reality, as independent entrepreneurs guided by self-interest,” but differ on the social utility of this. Myriam Gilles & Gary B. Friedman, *Exploding the Class Action Agency Costs Myth: The Social Utility of Entrepreneurial Lawyers*, 155 U. PA. L. REV. 103, 105 (2006) (“All that matters is whether the practice causes the defendant-wrongdoer to internalize the social costs of its actions.”); John C. Coffee, Jr., *The Regulation of Entrepreneurial Litigation: Balancing Fairness and Efficiency in the Large Class Action*, 54 U. CHI. L. REV. 877, 882-83 (1987); Jonathan R. Macey & Geoffrey P. Miller, *The Plaintiffs’ Attorney’s Role in Class Action and Derivative Litigation: Economic Analysis and Recommendations for Reform*, 58 U. CHI. L. REV. 1, 7-8 (1991).

155. See, e.g., *In re Molson Coors Brewing Co. Sec. Litig.*, 233 F.R.D. 147, 149 (D. Del. 2005) (“After going over the parties’ submissions and counter-submissions, which, including appendices, run to hundreds of pages in length, it strikes me that this exercise is simply a business investment for the lawyers.”).

156. See Lester Brickman, *Toxic Torts: Issues of Mass Litigation, Case Management, and Ethics*, 26 WM. & MARY ENVTL. L. & POL’Y REV. 243, 244 (2001) (“[T]he single most important factor accounting for the rise of the mass tort claim in recent decades is the enormous financial incentives that lawyers have structured and courts have condoned for bringing aggregative actions. . . . These fees frequently amount to thousands and tens of thousands of dollars an hour and even as much as hundreds of thousands of dollars an hour.”); see also Glenn W. Bailey, *Asbestos Litigation Monster Rewards Plaintiffs’ Lawyers While Devouring Jobs and Economic Growth*, LEGAL BACKGROUNDER, August 28, 1992, at 1-4 (estimating \$5000 per hour for plaintiffs’ asbestos work in 1992 and describing an asbestos case where two lawyers received a \$125 million contingency).

157. See *In re Corning, Inc. Sec. Litig.*, 349 F. Supp 2d 698, 712 (S.D.N.Y. 2004) (discussing the bankruptcy of Dow Corning); STEPHEN J. CARROLL ET AL., ASBESTOS LITIGATION 107-17 (RAND Corp. 2005), available at http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2005/RAND_MG162.pdf (discussing bankruptcies attributable to asbestos litigation).

158. See, e.g., *In re Silica Products Liability Litigation*, 398 F. Supp. 2d 563, 567 (D. Tex. 2005) [hereinafter *In re Silica*].

159. See *id.* (consolidating nearly 10,000 silica cases); see also *In re Silicone Gel Breast Implants Prods. Liab. Litig.*, 793 F. Supp. 1098, 1100 (J.P.M.L. 1992) (ordering

recent wave of 1,2-Dibromo-3-chloropropane (“DBCP”) plaintiffs from Central and South America. These plaintiffs are either litigating claims¹⁶⁰ or attempting to enforce foreign toxic tort judgments in this country.¹⁶¹

The case *In re Silica Products Liability Litigation*, although largely a misconduct case,¹⁶² provides a rare look at the machinery behind the large toxic tort. The O’Quinn firm, which is one of the country’s preeminent toxic tort practices¹⁶³ and which is renowned for obtaining the largest breast implant verdict in history,¹⁶⁴ along with several lesser known plaintiffs’ firms, brought over 10,000 individual silica claims. Many of these claims were ultimately consolidated in the multi-district litigation in the United States District Court for the Southern District of Texas. Although the facts varied, discovery regarding plaintiff recruitment revealed that the diagnosis of silicosis typically began with screening companies, which had been “initially established to meet law firm demand for asbestos cases.”¹⁶⁵ When the law firms began focusing on silica cases, the screening companies diagnosed “the law firms’

consolidation of pending and future breast implant cases); Richard B. Schmitt, *Panel of Experts to Study Silicone Breast Implants*, WALL ST. J., June 3, 1996, at B6 (indicating that over 21,000 breast implant claims were pending in the multi-district litigation before Judge Sam Pointer); *Lockheed Martin Corp. v. Super. Ct.*, 109 Cal. App. 4th 24, 28 (Ct. App. 2003) (concerning a statute of limitations in a case involving “nearly 800 persons for personal injuries as a result of exposure to toxic contaminants in the Redlands water supply”).

160. See *Martinez v. Dow Chemical Co.*, 219 F. Supp. 2d 719, 721 (D. La. 2002) (overruling defendants’ forum non conveniens challenge to Costa Rican DBCP plaintiffs bringing suit in Louisiana). See Noaki Schwartz, *Lawyer: Pesticide Left Workers Sterile*, ASSOC. PRESS, Oct. 10, 2007 (discussing suit by Nicaraguan DBCP plaintiffs pending in the Los Angeles Superior Court).

161. See *Dow Chemical Co. v. Calderon*, 422 F.3d 827, 829 (9th Cir. 2005) (discussing judgments obtained under a special Nicaraguan law, which presumes causation and forces DBCP defendants to post a \$20 million dollar bond).

162. *In re Silica* is primarily a fact specific misconduct case, faulting attorneys, experts and screening companies on the plaintiffs’ side for shirking ethical responsibilities by “manufactur[ing] [lawsuits] for money” when no medical basis for them existed. *In re Silica*, 398 F. Supp. at 635. While it did mention considerations common to modern toxic torts in general, such as advertising and recruitment, the financial relationship between experts and plaintiffs’ counsel and contingency fee incentives, it does not fault any of these in the abstraction. See *id.* at 634 (“It is important to emphasize that this discussion and this Order should not be taken as a criticism of the right of impaired individuals to seek redress through the courts.”).

163. See Max Boot, *King John’s Guide to Breast Implant Riches*, WALL ST. J., June 19, 1996, at A21 (criticizing litigation tactics of John O’Quinn); FORTUNE, Oct. 16, 1995, at front cover (recognizing leading breast implant plaintiffs’ attorney, John O’Quinn).

164. See generally Amy Singer, *Look Over Here: How John O’Quinn Directed a Jury’s Attention Toward the Strongest Elements of His Case—and Won the Largest Verdict Ever in a Breast Implant Suit*, AM. LAW, March 1993.

165. *In re Silica*, 398 F. Supp. at 597.

‘existing inventory’ of asbestos plaintiffs” as silicosis plaintiffs.¹⁶⁶ To generate additional plaintiffs, the law firms also advertised mass screenings. The screening companies themselves were financially dependent on the law firms and, therefore, would customize their screenings to fit the law firms’ wishes.¹⁶⁷ In some instances, the screening companies’ compensation was dependent on a positive diagnosis and a successful referral to the firm.¹⁶⁸ Operations in the breast implant,¹⁶⁹ asbestos,¹⁷⁰ welding fumes litigation,¹⁷¹ DBCP¹⁷² and, to a more varying extent, community exposure cases¹⁷³ have reportedly been structured similarly.

166. *Id.*

167. *See id.* at 598.

168. *See id.* at 601 (“If the patient was not diagnosed with silicosis or did not sign-up with [the law firm], [the screening company] was paid nothing.”).

169. *See* Max Boot, *Queen of Torts*, WALL ST. J., May 16, 1996, at A14; *see also* Max Boot, *A Tale of Silicone City*, WALL ST. J., Nov. 29, 1995, at A14.

170. *See* CARROLL, *supra* note 157, 107-17 (discussing the use of screening companies and advertising in asbestos litigation); Victor E. Schwartz et al., *Addressing the “Elephantine Mass” of Asbestos Cases: Consolidation Versus Inactive Dockets*, 31 PEPP. L. REV. 271, 278 (2003) (“[The] increase in filings by unimpaired claims may result from mass screenings conducted by plaintiffs’ law firms and their agents to identify and recruit potential clients. Such screenings are frequently conducted in areas with high concentrations of workers who may have worked in jobs where they were exposed to asbestos. As Senior United States District Court Judge Jack Weinstein and Bankruptcy Court Judge Burton Lifland recently explained: ‘[c]laimants today are diagnosed largely through plaintiff-lawyer arranged mass screening programs targeting possibly asbestos-exposed workers and attraction of potential claimants through the mass media.’”).

171. *See In re Welding Fume Prods. Liab. Litig.*, No. 1:03-CV-17000, 2006 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 16407, at *36-37 (D. Ohio April 5, 2006).

172. *See generally* Christian Miller, *Plantation Workers Look for Justice in the North*, L.A. TIMES, May 27, 2007.

173. *See* Lester Brickman, *Toxic Torts Issues of Mass Litigation, Case Management, and Ethics*, 26 WM. & MARY ENVTL. L. & POL’Y REV. 243, 244 (2001) (recognizing that increased litigation activity is also facilitated by “widespread solicitation of potential claimants by use of mass advertising, ‘800’ phone numbers, and websites; close association with union officials in a position to steer large numbers of claimants to specific lawyers; the formation of victim support groups that are overtly or surreptitiously underwritten by lawyers and; the formation of networks of lawyers specialized to particular product claims”); Leon Jaroff, *Erin Brockovich’s Junk Science: Her New Suit Against Oil Companies and Beverly Hills Has Little Scientific Grounding*, TIME ONLINE, July 11, 2003, available at <http://www.time.com/time/columnist/jaroff/article/0%2C9565%2C464386%2C00.html> (“The resulting two-part TV series caused widespread concern, if not panic, among Beverly Hills high school students, parents and graduates. Six hundred people attended a meeting hosted by Brockovich at the posh Beverly Hills Hotel to recruit potential litigants, who were asked to fill out questionnaires to document their illnesses.”); David Caruso, *Oil Contamination Fuels Brooklyn Residents’ Lawsuit*, ASSOC. PRESS, March 5, 2006, at A-10 (“The families are represented by a California law firm that has brought in activist Erin Brockovich to recruit more plaintiffs.”); Hugo Martin, *Lawyers Solicit Clients for Suit Against Mobil*, L.A. TIMES, July 23, 1989, at 4 (reporting on plaintiffs’ lawyers sending 10,000 post cards bearing a skull and crossbones to residence in an effort to “sign up residents as plaintiffs in a class-

Thus, modern toxic torts do not fit the typical model of the powerless victim seeking out the lawyer for redress. Instead, they are frequently conceived of by powerful interests, for example, plaintiffs' firms, who are repeat players in a given class of toxic torts. These characteristics make it more likely that, as a group, toxic tort defendants will encounter plaintiffs attempting to use their lobbying against them. Because ostensibly large business ventures have the potential of large losses or enormous contingency fees, plaintiffs' counsel have a strong incentive, far beyond what exists in garden variety torts, to construct their cases so as to maximize the significance of the defendants' lobbying. Given this, along with the significant resources that notable plaintiffs' firms bring to their cases, both the discovery and the use of defendants' potentially unpopular lobbying become more likely.

B. Politics, Perception and Causation of Toxic Torts

In addition to the mechanistic efficiency that allows larger and more profitable lawsuits to be brought, which in turn can support inquires into prejudicial lobbying, modern toxic torts also implicate *Noerr-Pennington* in that they are matters of public concern influenced by and themselves influencing politics. Both the Bendectin and breast implant litigations illustrate this, and both, in retrospect, underscore the dangers of allowing a toxic tort plaintiff to use a defendant's political speech as a basis for liability.

Much has been said about the now debunked Bendectin¹⁷⁴ and breast implant litigations.¹⁷⁵ The purpose of this analysis is not to repeat this commentary or imply that causal allegations in toxic torts are always false merely because the allegations in those cases were. Instead, it is to use these well-studied toxic torts to illustrate that a fraud exception by which a toxic tort plaintiff could deter a defendant's counter-veiling petitions is harmful in that it chills necessary political discourse on weighty social questions. These litigations continue to be important because, while the substances at issue have changed in later toxic torts, many of the legal, social and political dynamics remain constant.

action suit that would allege that the refinery's emissions have injured the health of hundreds").

174. See Joseph Sanders, *From Science to Evidence: The Testimony on Causation in the Bendectin Cases*, 46 STAN. L. REV. 1, 53 (1993); Gary Edmond, *Whigs in Court: Historical Problems with Expert Evidence*, 14 YALE J.L. & HUMAN 123, 160 (2002) ("Almost all scholarly accounts describe the Bendectin litigation as an extreme example of legal pathology."); David E. Bernstein, *The Breast Implant Fiasco*, 87 CAL. L. REV. 457, 460 (1999). See MICHAEL D. GREEN, *BENDECTIN AND BIRTH DEFECTS: THE CHALLENGES OF MASS TOXIC SUBSTANCES LITIGATION* 215 (Univ. of Pa. Press 1996).

175. See Bernstein, *supra* note 174, at 460.

1. Bendectin

Bendectin litigation has been called the epitome of tort pathology, “the single most criticized piece of large-scale litigation of all time.”¹⁷⁶ It seemed to begin legitimately enough; however, in retrospect, it was largely the byproduct of messianic conviction coupled with scientific fraud to buttress it.

When Betty Mekdeci’s¹⁷⁷ son was born in 1975 with limb and other birth defects, Ms. Mekdeci became consumed with finding the cause. Earlier, in 1972, medical researcher Dr. William McBride, the “father of teratology,” having reached international fame for discovering the link between thalidomide and reduced limb birth defects,¹⁷⁸ confidentially reported to authorities that he believed Bendectin caused three birth defects. It leaked to the press, and the press broadcasted the allegation.¹⁷⁹ Of the dozen drugs Ms. Mekdeci had taken during her pregnancy, she settled on Bendectin as the source of her son’s birth defects by process of elimination. She had taken only three drugs, Erythromycin, Bendectin and Actifed during the twenty-four to thirty-six day gestational period in which her son’s defective limb was formed.¹⁸⁰ Of the three drugs, only Bendectin had case reports of pregnancy defects.¹⁸¹ Furthermore, when Merrill Dow sought to reformulate Bendectin in 1976 to remove a component that controlled studies had found to be ineffective in treating nausea, she saw it as a cover-up, thus further indicting Bendectin.¹⁸² She learned that Merrill Dow had been involved with thalidomide in Europe, implicating Bendectin by association.¹⁸³ At some point between 1976 and 1977, Ms. Mekdeci became fanatical in her condemnation of Bendectin, believing “evidence

176. Edmond, *supra* note 174, at 160 (noting that “almost all scholarly accounts describe the Bendectin litigation as an extreme example of legal pathology,” and those that have studied it largely agree that “Bendectin is the Taj Mahal of horror stories about the tort system”).

177. See GREEN, *supra* note 174, at 97.

178. See *McBride v. Merrell Dow & Pharm.*, 800 F.2d 1208, 1211 (D.C. Cir. 1986) (“The alleged link between Bendectin and birth defects had begotten a widespread and heated public controversy over the drug’s safety. . . . McBride voluntarily entered this controversy, intending to influence its outcome. . . . As a world-renowned expert on birth defects—he was prominent in discovering the dangers of Thalidomide and has been dubbed the ‘Father of Teratology’—McBride occupied a central place in the Bendectin debate.”).

179. See *Another Birth Drug Suspect*, SYDNEY MORNING HERALD, April 19, 1972.

180. See GREEN, *supra* note 174, at 99.

181. See *id.* at 100.

182. See *id.* at 101.

183. See *id.* at 103.

pointing toward Bendectin's teratogenicity and discounting anything to the contrary."¹⁸⁴

Politically, she lobbied the FDA, CDC, state agencies and even Congress.¹⁸⁵ She convinced famed personal injury attorney Melvin Belli to bring a toxic tort suit for her. The litigation was an isolated incident until October of 1979 when the National Enquirer published a story it received from Mr. Belli that prominently featured Dr. McBride blaming the morning sickness pill for birth defects.¹⁸⁶ Following the National Enquirer article, the first Bendectin trial, which was Ms. Mekdeci's trial, took place in Orlando in 1980 amid great publicity.¹⁸⁷ Dr. McBride, already viewed as "one of the leading critics" of Bendectin, testified that Bendectin "is not safe and that it caused birth defects."¹⁸⁸

The issue of political speech immunity arose early. A witness covered the FDA hearing in an article with a marginally unflattering account of Dr. McBride's testimony, mentioning (arguably overstating) his high trial testimony rate, noting his association with Mr. Belli in the Bendectin litigation and characterizing his testimony before the FDA as unimpressive. In 1981, Dr. McBride sued Merrill Dow, its officers and directors as well as the author and publisher of the article, alleging that they were responsible for the article. Dr. McBride claimed that Merrill Dow used the article "as part of its scheme to silence plaintiff, indoctrinate the scientific community and avoid or stall access to the courts for maimed babies."¹⁸⁹ The allegations, predicated on Dr. McBride's performance at the FDA hearing, were dismissed under official proceeding immunity¹⁹⁰ while those allegations invoking his

184. *Id.* The evidence proving Bendectin's lack of teratogenicity was weak in the late 1970s with the three existing epidemiological studies all being subject to valid criticisms. *See id.* at 104-06. However, it far outstripped that which Ms. Mekdeci drew her conviction from. One was a Canadian registry noting that three women taking Bendectin had babies with reduced limb defects. The data is of course meaningless unless the percentage of women taking Bendectin is known. She relied on the similarly meaningless existence of eighty-six reports of birth defects for women taking Bendectin. For, as was explained to Ms. Mekdeci by Dr. Janerich of the New York Department of Health, "without information on the total number of pregnant women exposed to Bendectin over all the time it has been marketed, it is impossible to evaluate the occurrence of 130 cases of congenital malformation. Bendectin was on the market when the thalidomide tragedy occurred." *See id.* at 106.

185. *See* GREEN, *supra* note 174, at 106-08.

186. *See id.*; Bernstein, *supra* note 174, at 460; *New Thalidomide-Type Scandal—Experts Reveal . . . Common Drug Causing Deformed Babies*, NAT'L ENQUIRER, Oct. 9, 1979, at 20.

187. *See* McBride v. Merrell Dow & Pharm., Inc., 540 F. Supp. 1252, 1254 (D.D.C. 1982).

188. *Id.*

189. McBride v. Merrell Dow & Pharm., 717 F.2d 1460, 1463 (D.C. Cir. 1983).

190. *See id.* at 1465.

association with Mr. Belli were judged “frivolous and verg[ing] on the preposterous.”¹⁹¹ Still, despite the D.C. Circuit holding that Dr. McBride was a public figure due to his having “voluntarily entered this controversy, intending to influence its outcome,” his lawsuit remained inconclusive five years later.¹⁹²

Meanwhile, the tort suits proceeded. Ms. Mekdeci’s case did not go well.¹⁹³ However, it was established that 30% of pregnant women took Bendectin and that historically 5% of all live births suffered from congenital deformities. These telling facts promised a massive plaintiff pool, and as a result, more cases followed.¹⁹⁴ Approximately 40% of the cases were consolidated, with the question of whether Bendectin causes birth defects tried separately to a defense verdict.¹⁹⁵ Furthermore, individual cases proceeded to trial in jurisdictions all over the country, generally presenting the same evidence through the same experts.

Despite the rising number of Bendectin cases, plaintiffs lacked causation evidence.¹⁹⁶ Moreover, by the late 1980s it was becoming increasingly obvious that Dr. McBride, who “occupied a central place in the Bendectin debate” as a frequent plaintiffs’ expert,¹⁹⁷ had deliberately

191. *Id.* at 1464.

192. In *McBride*, the D.C. Circuit reversed the district court’s dismissal based both in the district court denying discovery into defendant’s motives and on defendant’s failure to produce evidence of the rates charged by Dow Merrell’s experts, thus validating the comparison. *Id.* at 1464-67.

193. The *Mekdeci* case was complicated by the mother having taken other drugs during her pregnancy and the child having unilateral deformity inconsistent with Dr. McBride’s causation theory. The result was a \$20,000 verdict compared to out-of-pocket legal expenses of \$150,000. See Richard L. Marcus, *Reexamining the Bendectin Litigation Story*, 83 IOWA L. REV. 231, 235 (1996).

194. See *id.* at 236.

195. See *id.* at 239.

196. One early court found that a reasonable jury was not likely to find that “this infant plaintiff’s birth defects were more likely than not to have been caused by her intrauterine exposure to Bendectin; alternatively, even if such a finding were reasonable, it is nevertheless so clearly contrary to the weight of the evidence that the case must be retried.” *Richardson v. Richardson-Merrell, Inc.*, 649 F. Supp. 799, 799-800 (D.D.C. 1986). See *Hull v. Merrell Dow Pharm., Inc.*, 700 F. Supp. 28, 29 (D. Fla. 1988) (granting summary judgment for the defense because “[t]he body of scientific literature demonstrating the safety of Bendectin is extensive and overwhelming. More than thirty human epidemiological studies have been done and none have concluded that Bendectin is teratogenic.”).

197. *McBride v. Merrell Dow & Pharm.*, 717 F.2d 1460, 1462 (D.C. Cir. 1983) (“Dr. McBride, who filed the complaint for defamation, is a citizen of Australia and a research physician well-known for his work in the field of teratology. Among other accomplishments, he played a role in showing that thalidomide could cause birth defects.”). See Michael Green, *Expert Witnesses and Sufficiency of Evidence in Toxic Substances Litigation: The Legacy of Agent Orange and Bendectin Litigation*, 86 NW. U. L. REV. 643, 699 n.68 (1992). Dr. McBride served widely as a causation expert for Bendectin plaintiffs, until investigations of his altering results to obtain research findings against Bendectin undercut his credibility. See Joseph Sanders, *From Science to*

falsified his research¹⁹⁸ so as to link the active ingredient in Bendectin to limb birth defects. Indeed, the same year that the Supreme Court's *Daubert v. Merrill Dow* decision unofficially closed out the Bendectin litigation with the introduction of judicial gate-keeping,¹⁹⁹ Dr. McBride was discharged from the practice of medicine for having falsified Bendectin research.²⁰⁰ Because of his pre-existing prestige and his status as one of only two plaintiffs' Bendectin experts to have published on this issue,²⁰¹ Dr. McBride's professional demise was highly significant to the rise and fall of Bendectin litigation.²⁰² Nevertheless, plaintiffs continued to win jury verdicts, including seven and eight figure amounts,²⁰³ in the same proportion as plaintiffs generally win in products liability cases.²⁰⁴

Evidence: The Testimony on Causation in the Bendectin Cases, 46 STAN. L. REV. 1, 34 (1993); Norman Swan, *The Man Who Stopped Thalidomide Accused of Fraud*, SYDNEY MORNING HERALD, Dec. 14, 1987, at 1.

198. See Harry Gibbs, *Report of Committee of Inquiry Concerning Dr. McBride*, SYDNEY FOUNDATION, 1988, at 41 (investigating allegations of falsification of results for a study involving thalidomide and finding that "Dr. McBride was lacking in scientific integrity"); Frank Wells, *Fraud and Misconduct in Medical Research*, 43 BRIT. J. CLINICAL PHARMACOLOGY 3, 3-7 (1997) ("[Dr. McBride] then went on to indict Debendox (known in Australia as Bendectin) as a drug which had the same teratogenic effects as thalidomide, but without any evidence to support the indictment. In fact, he falsified the experimental data to imply that teratogenicity had occurred when it had not because his blind belief in the dangers of Debendox was so great that he consciously changed the data 'in the long term interest of humanity.'").

199. See *Daubert v. Merrell Dow Pharm.*, 509 U.S. 579, 590 (1993).

200. See Margaret Scheikowski, *Thalidomide Doctor Back After Fraud*, THE DAILY TELEGRAPH (Sydney, Australia), Nov. 10, 1998, at 3 (reporting that in 1993, Dr. McBride was "[s]truck off the medical register for falsifying research data in the Debendox [(Bendectin)] case," had his application rejected in 1996, then was readmitted after he "apologized, admitted the deliberate fraud and said his continued attempts to self justify the paper had been wrong").

201. See Robert L. Brent, *Bendectin: Review of the Medical Literature of a Comprehensively Studied Human Nonteratogen and the Most Prevalent Tortogen-Litigen*, 9 REPROD. TOXICOLOGY 337, 344 (1995) ("Only two of the plaintiffs experts have published their views on Bendectin . . . [and] McBride's teratology research using scopolamine was the subject of an investigation at Foundation 41, in Australia, the site of his research activities and later by a Medical Tribunal of New South Wales, Australia. His research was judged to be fraudulent, the committee concluding that 'deliberate falsification did occur.'"). The only other plaintiff expert to publish was Dr. Newman, whose work was limited to in vitro (test tube) studies. See *id.*

202. See *McBride v. Merrell Dow & Pharm.*, 800 F.2d 1208, 1214 (D.C. Cir. 1986).

203. See Sanders, *supra* note 174, at 5; *DeLuca v. Merrell Dow Pharm., Inc.*, 791 F. Supp. 1042, 1057 (D.N.J. 1992); *Merrell Dow Pharm. v. Havner*, 953 S.W.2d 706, 709 (Tex. 1997) (reversing jury verdict for \$3.75 million in actual damages and \$30 million in punitive damages); *Blum v. Merrell Dow Pharm., Inc.*, 564 Pa. 3, 5 (2000) (reversing \$19.2 million dollar jury verdict).

204. See Marcus, *supra* note 193, at 237; W. Kip Viscusi, *Corporate Risk Analysis: A Reckless Act?*, 52 STAN. L. REV. 547, 584 (2000) ("[T]he wave of Bendectin litigation ultimately cost manufacturers so much that they stopped marketing the product. Although no jury verdict that Bendectin causes birth defects has ever been upheld on

History eventually cleared Bendectin. Legally, there was not a single Bendectin verdict that withstood appeal.²⁰⁵ Politically, the FDA courted pharmaceutical companies to convince them to reintroduce Bendectin.²⁰⁶ Socially, what began with a self-taught, world-famous, yet misguided teratologist²⁰⁷ resulted in a net harm. Up to 80% of mothers-to-be experience nausea during pregnancy,²⁰⁸ and Bendectin was and is the only prescription drug approved by the FDA to treat that condition.²⁰⁹ Withdrawal of Bendectin from the U.S. market²¹⁰ appears to have produced “an increase in hospitalizations for hyperemesis gravidarum, a severe form of morning sickness that requires medical intervention, often by intravenous rehydration.”²¹¹ An in-depth story by the New York Times revealed American women driving to Canada to obtain Bendectin and that, “[i]n desperation, a few doctors say they tell women essentially to make their own Bendectin.”²¹²

2. Breast Implant Litigation

The breast implant litigation of the 1980s was largely brought on by the effective regulatory petitioning of those opposed to breast implants.²¹³ In November of 1988 a pro-regulatory, anti-industry activist

appeal, plaintiffs have received a favorable verdict in approximately 36% of the cases that have gone to trial.”)

205. See Viscusi, *supra* note 204, at 584.

206. The FDA took the unusual step of issuing an unsolicited finding in August of 1999 that Bendectin was not withdrawn for safety reasons. Determination that Bendectin was not Withdrawn from Sale for Reasons of Safety or Effectiveness, 64 Fed. Reg. 43, 190 (Aug. 9, 1999). The move was seen as the agency soliciting the re-introduction of Bendectin and drew renewed threats from dated Bendectin plaintiffs’ lawyers.

207. See Wells, *supra* note 198, at 3-7 (stating that Dr. McBride’s “blind belief in the dangers of Debendox was so great that he consciously changed the data ‘in the long term interest of humanity’”). Ms. Mekdeci was sincere in her belief as her organization, Birth Defect Research for Children, Inc. (“BDRC”), still, long after the litigation has dried up, actively argues to the public and government agencies that Bendectin causes birth defects. Betty Mekdeci, *Bendectin: How a Commonly Used Drug Caused Birth Defects*, BDRC, available at <http://www.birthdefects.org/Research/bendectin1.htm> (purporting to show an increase in birth defects among children of mothers who took Bendectin).

208. Jeffrey Quinland & Ashley Hill, *Nausea and Vomiting of Pregnancy*, 68 AM. FAM. PHYSICIAN 121 (2003), available at <http://www.aafp.org/afp/20030701/121.html>.

209. See P. Mazzota et al., *Attitudes, Management and Consequences of Nausea and Vomiting of Pregnancy in the United States and Canada*, 70 INT’L. J. GYNECOLOGY & OBSTETRICS 359, 360 (2000).

210. In an interview conducted by the New York Times, a company lawyer reported that a large part of the reason for the withdrawal was the cost of insurance: “[b]efore they finally pulled it off the market, the insurance was going to cost them more per year than the amount they sold—not the profit but the amount they sold.” See Gina Kolata, *Controversial Drug Makes a Comeback*, N.Y. TIMES, Sept. 26, 2000, at F.

211. GREEN, *supra* note 174, at 336.

212. Kolata, *supra* note 210, at F.

213. See Bernstein, *supra* note 174, at 467.

group, Public Citizens Health Research Group (“Public Citizen”) called for a ban on breast implants based on a dubious rat study implying a cancer risk.²¹⁴ The ban failed.²¹⁵ However, in December of 1990, Connie Chung, then of NBC, aired an inflammatory special on breast implants, calling silicone “an ooze of slimy gelatin that could be poisoning women.”²¹⁶ Representative Ted Weiss, who had ties to Public Citizen, held congressional hearings a week later along similar lines,²¹⁷ which were used as a springboard to lobby the FDA to ban implants based on the risk of cancer. The FDA resisted, but ultimately buckled in 1992 when presented with embarrassing internal Dow Corning documents obtained through litigation.²¹⁸

The 1992 FDA moratorium touched off an explosion of breast implant litigation such that by December of that year 3558 suits were pending and quadruple that number a year later.²¹⁹ Less than five years after the litigation began, Dow Corning was bankrupt.²²⁰

As with Bendectin, plaintiffs lacked evidence of causation.²²¹ By 1994, “a large, rigorous, and well controlled epidemiological study” proved that plaintiffs’ allegations of autoimmune disease were incorrect.²²² By the close of the century, over twenty-five studies found that women with breast implants did not have a significantly increased risk of autoimmune disease.²²³ In 1996, Judge Pointer of the Central District of Alabama, who was then presiding over all consolidated breast implant cases, assigned the question of causation to a National Science Panel. It found “that there is no meaningful or consistent association between breast implants or silicone gel-filled implants and any of the conditions studied.”²²⁴ Within a year, the National Academy of Science confirmed that “there was not ‘even suggestive evidence’ that silicone

214. Rats implanted with globs of silicone developed fibrosarcoma, a form of cancer. *See id.* at 465. However, as Bernstein explains, it is well known that rats, unlike humans, develop this cancer in response to any large smooth object being implanted in them. *See id.*

215. *See id.* at 466 n.36.

216. *See id.* at 467.

217. *See id.* at 468.

218. *See* Bernstein, *supra* note 174, at 474.

219. *See id.* at 477, 479.

220. *See In re Corning, Inc., Sec. Litig.*, 349 F. Supp. 2d 698, 712 (D.N.Y. 2004).

221. *See Hall v. Baxter Healthcare Corp.*, 947 F. Supp. 1387, 1406 (D. Or. 1996) (excluding expert opinion based on re-analysis, case reports and animal studies for breast implants); *Allison v. McGhan Med. Corp.*, 184 F.3d 1300, 1315 (11th Cir. 1999); *Kelley v. American Heyer-Schulte Corp.*, 957 F. Supp. 873, 879 (D. Tex. 1997).

222. *See In re Breast Implant Litig.*, 11 F. Supp. 2d 1217, 1227 (D. Colo. 1998).

223. *See* Debora L. Worthington et al., *Hindsight Bias, Daubert, and the Silicone Breast Implant Litigation*, 8 PSYCHOL. PUB. POL’Y & L. 154, 167; *Grant v. Bristol-Myers Squibb*, 97 F. Supp. 2d 986, 990 (D. Ariz. 2000).

224. *Norris v. Baxter Healthcare Corp.*, 397 F. 3d 878, 881 (10th Cir. 2005).

breast implants caused systemic disease.”²²⁵ This finding largely ended the litigation over breast implants.

V. The Political Speech Lessons of Toxic Torts: Why a Fraud Exception Begets Folly

Noerr-Pennington immunity is premised on the recognition that the specter of tort liability for petitioning is a powerful and undesirable deterrent.²²⁶ The longstanding constitutional edict in the United States is that an atmosphere of freedom to petition, on the whole, is a societal good,²²⁷ while systematic inhibitors of petitioning are a detriment.²²⁸

There are two lessons relevant to political speech to be taken from the Bendectin and breast implant litigation, and another from site-specific lobbying. First, neither the causative allegations nor verdicts in toxic torts are particularly good indicators of scientific truth. As a society, we would be foolish to allow either to set the bounds of our political discourse. Second, the toxic tort is politicized such that it influences and is itself influenced by regulatory and legislative determinations. This is to be expected, but becomes problematic if a fraud exception to *Noerr-Pennington* immunity allows one side to be systematically deterred from participating in the political process. It is undemocratic and contrary to *Noerr-Pennington* for any tort allegation or finding to circumscribe political debate. Those of the toxic tort are uniquely unsuited to do so because each party can potentially enhance its litigation position through political success. Lastly, a fraud exception to petition immunity undermines site-specific lobbying by stifling necessary communication between potentially responsible parties and agencies with the threat of veyeuristic fraud claims.

A. *Freewheeling Causation and Guarded Speech*

The heart of toxic torts, and consequently much of the controversy surrounding them, is their causative pronouncement that a given

225. *Id.* (quoting COMM. ON THE SAFETY OF SILICONE BREAST IMPLANTS, INST. OF MED., SAFETY OF SILICONE BREAST IMPLANTS 432 (1999)).

226. *See* First Nat'l Bank v. Marquette Nat'l Bank, 482 F. Supp. 514, 525 (D. Minn. 1979) (holding that *Noerr-Pennington* should apply to all causes of action because “to hold otherwise would effectively chill the defendants First Amendment rights”).

227. *See, e.g.,* E. R.R. Presidents Conference v. Noerr Motor Freight, Inc., 365 U.S. 127, 139-40 (1961) (“A construction of the Sherman Act that would disqualify people from taking a public position on matters in which they are financially interested would thus deprive the government of a valuable source of information and, at the same time, deprive the people of their right to petition in the very instances in which that right may be of the most importance to them.”).

228. *See* CAL. CIV. PROC. CODE § 425.16(a) (West 2008).

exposure or exposures bring about some compensable injury.²²⁹ Without this pronouncement, the components they link—exposure and disease—are separately unremarkable, as human existence has always been accompanied by both.²³⁰ Thus, there is no shortage of commentary on causation standards in toxic torts. Most commentators on the subject criticize traditional tests of causation as too onerous for what are argued to be the unique considerations of toxic torts.²³¹ Although many writers seem to reach this assessment by presuming factual causation then faulting the law for failing to find it,²³² there is little disagreement that toxic torts—particularly those involving more dubious theories of harm—often lack scientific support.

229. Law reviews and journals are heavily populated with articles arguing that standard requirements of causation fail in the toxic tort context, and proposing various alternatives. See, e.g., David Rosenberg, *The Causal Connection in Mass Exposure Cases: A "Public Law" Vision of the Tort System*, 97 HARV. L. REV. 851, 855 (1984).

230. See generally Brickman, *supra* note 149.

231. See, e.g., Margaret A. Berger, *Eliminating General Causation: Notes Towards a New Theory of Justice and Toxic Torts*, 97 COLUM. L. REV. 2117, 2117 (1997) ("The causation model is blind to the realities of scientific uncertainty and corporate behavior, and is inconsistent with notions of moral responsibility underlying tort law."); Shelly Brinker, Comment, *Opening the Door to the Indeterminate Plaintiff: An Analysis of the Causation Barriers Facing Environmental Toxic Tort Plaintiffs*, 46 UCLA L. REV. 1289, 1291 (1999); Danielle Conway-Jones, *Factual Causation in Toxic Tort Litigation: A Philosophical View of Proof and Certainty in Uncertain Disciplines*, 35 U. RICH. L. REV. 875, 876 (2002) ("While exposure to toxic substances has become the norm, findings of culpability against those responsible for creating the exposure and any ensuing harm seem to be nonexistent."); Gerald W. Boston, *Toxic Apportionment: A Causation and Risk Contribution Model*, 25 ENVTL. L. 549, 551-53 (1995) (arguing that "[i]n a typical toxic tort case, the plaintiff or the plaintiff's property suffers some harm as a result of exposure to one or more sources of a toxic substance," but that current causation standards create an improper "all-or-nothing" approach).

232. See Carin Cardinale, *The Long Island Breast Cancer Study: Results of an Epidemiological Study Cause Considerable Barriers to Legal Relief*, 9 ALB. L. ENVTL. OUTLOOK 147, 149 (2004) ("*Annunziato* demonstrates the difficulty in proving both the general and individual causation of a harmful substance that caused injury in a toxic tort case."); Eric Wilson, *Hope for Hanford Downwinders?: The Ninth Circuit's Ruling in In Re Hanford Nuclear Reservation Litigation*, 82 OR. L. REV. 581, 622 (2003) ("Delays are particularly troubling because most of the injuries in *In re Hanford* that plaintiffs sustained occurred more than fifty-five years ago."); Michel Baumeister & Dorothea Capone, *Expert Admissibility Symposium: Reliability Standards—Too High, Too Low, or Just Right?: Admissibility Standards as Politics—The Imperial Gate Closers Arrive!!*, 33 SETON HALL L. REV. 1025, 1027 (2003) ("[M]any of these toxins became the subject of civil lawsuits brought by persons exposed to these substances who were suffering from chronic illnesses or diseases, or the families of those who died as a result of their exposure."); Brinker, *supra* note 231, at 1296 ("The common-law tort system, however, is not particularly amenable to plaintiffs in their efforts to recover for the devastating personal injuries that often result from exposure to environmental toxic substances."); see also Alani Golanski, *General Causation at a Crossroads in Toxic Tort Cases*, 108 PENN ST. L. REV. 479, 480 (2003) ("The abolitionists [of causation] . . . presuppose the very general causation finding that their proposal inveighs against, and depreciates the current system.").

The Bendectin²³³ and breast implant litigation²³⁴ pioneered the technique for bringing in large compensatory verdicts without winning causation²³⁵ by trying the defendant without proving the injury. A post-mortem analysis of Bendectin trials found generally that, saddled with a weak causation case, plaintiffs' counsel attempted to commingle elements, thus bolstering causation with more compelling and emotional proof of bad conduct.²³⁶ The same was true of breast implant litigation, where commentators note that in an early, pattern-setting case, "[t]he plaintiff had no valid scientific evidence linking breast implants with her disease, so her attorney emphasized the allegedly irresponsible behavior of the defendant."²³⁷

Verdict results and psychological research illustrate the effectiveness of this approach. Forensic analysis found that, despite the lack of causation evidence, Bendectin plaintiffs won jury verdicts in the same proportion as plaintiffs generally win in products liability cases.²³⁸ Most strikingly, the wins were distributed evenly despite the fact that by the later cases a scientific consensus largely existed that Bendectin did not cause birth defects.²³⁹

233. See Viscusi, *supra* note 204, at 584 ("[T]he wave of Bendectin litigation ultimately cost manufacturers so much that they stopped marketing the product. Although no jury verdict that Bendectin causes birth defects has ever been upheld on appeal, plaintiffs have received a favorable verdict in approximately 36% of the cases that have gone to trial.").

234. See Bernstein, *supra* note 174; Peter J. Goss et al., *Clearing Away the Junk: Court-Appointed Experts, Scientifically Marginal Evidence, and the Silicone Gel Breast Implant Litigation*, 56 FOOD & DRUG L. J. 227, 239 (2001). See *Meister v. Med. Eng'g Corp.*, 267 F.3d 1123, 1132 (D.C. Cir. 2001) (affirming JNOV vacating verdict for \$10 million); see also *Minnesota Mining and Mfg. Co. v. Atterbury*, 978 S.W.2d 183, 186 (Tex. Ct. App. 1998) (reviewing jury verdict of \$1.5 million because plaintiffs' evidence was inadmissible); *Toole v. Baxter Healthcare Corp.*, 235 F.3d 1307, 1311 (11th Cir. 2000) (recognizing a jury verdict of \$6 million); *Dow Chem. Co. v. Mahlum*, 114 Nev. 1468, 1482 (1998) (finding "substantial evidence" to support \$4.1 million verdict).

235. See Bernstein, *supra* note 174 (analyzing the litigation from the perspective of the phantom risk and the factors determinative of success in such litigations). From this and other litigations, Bernstein distills four factors for phantom litigation to take hold: "(1) sensationalistic media coverage; (2) actions by politically motivated individuals and organizations that result in the downplaying of objective scientific inquiry; (3) public outrage at reports of corporate irresponsibility; and (4) financial incentives that encourage attorneys and their clients to pursue claims that have a dubious scientific basis." See *id.*

236. See Sanders, *supra* note 174, at 53.

237. Bernstein, *supra* note 174, at 464. See Singer, *supra* note 164, at 86. *But cf.* *Renaud v. Martin Marietta Corp.*, 749 F. Supp. 1545, 1551 (D. Colo. 1990) ("[P]roof that Martin committed reprehensible acts coupled with evidence of injury is not enough to prevail on a tort claim. Plaintiffs must prove that the reprehensible acts caused, or increased the likelihood of, the alleged injuries.").

238. See *infra* note 233.

239. See Sanders, *supra* note 174, at 12.

Two psychological constructs explain this. First, empirical research on bifurcation shows that jurors do use evidence of misconduct to compensate for weak causation. In a landmark study by Irwin Horowitz and Kenneth Bordens, researchers presented a simulated toxic tort trial, which included evidence of bad conduct, causation and damages, to mock juries.²⁴⁰ When juries heard all the evidence, 87.5% found causation.²⁴¹ With only causation evidence presented, the number dropped to 25%.²⁴² This proved to be the case in bifurcated Bendectin and breast implant cases, where the considerations of causation evidence without accompanying evidence of bad conduct, almost universally resulted in what is now accepted as the correct finding: no causation.²⁴³ The second construct is culpable causation, or the natural tendency to assume that blameworthy conduct is of greater causal importance than morally neutral actions.²⁴⁴ Thus, even when actions are of equal causal significance, such as speeding motivated by blameworthy drug dealing on the one hand or speeding motivated by a commendable desire to surprise a spouse on an anniversary on the other hand, jurors will consistently assume that the former played a greater role in an accident.²⁴⁵

This use of conduct to compensate for missing causation continues and is even defended by commentators.²⁴⁶ For example, in commenting on the scientifically controversial²⁴⁷ *Erin Brockovich* case, lead trial lawyer Walter Lack observed that “[j]urors reacted against the behavior of PG&E. PG&E officials knew about the contamination, didn’t disclose the problem to the water board, and then lied about it. So? A jury faced

240. See Irwin A. Horowitz & Kenneth S. Bordens, *An Experimental Investigation of Procedural Issues in Complex Tort Trials*, 14 *LAW & HUM. BEHAV.* 269, 274-78 (1990). The “trial” was made up of opening statements, initial instructions, conduct evidence, causation evidence, damages, closing statements and final jury instructions. See *id.*

241. See *id.* at 278.

242. See *id.*

243. Plaintiffs lost every Bendectin trial where causation was tried separately from conduct, and, likely appreciating this, the lead counsel in the MDL litigation opted most of his cases out of the trial. See GREEN, *supra* note 174, at 215.

244. See generally Mark D. Alicke, *Culpable Causation*, 63 *J. PERSONALITY & SOC. PSYCHOL.* 368 (1992).

245. See *id.*

246. See, e.g., Berger, *supra* note 231, at 2147 (arguing in favor of eliminating causation to deter social harm and proposing a model “consistent with the jurors’ intuition in the Bendectin cases that irresponsible corporate behavior should be penalized”).

247. See generally Michael Fumento, *Erin Brockovich Exposed*, *WALL ST. J.*, Mar. 28, 2000, available at <http://www.soc.iastate.edu/sapp/fumento1.pdf> (discussing the lack of scientific evidence that chromium six caused the illnesses alleged).

with those kind of facts generally will look past a difficult causation issue.”²⁴⁸

Nevertheless, for free speech purposes, it matters little whether one considers causation an unfortunate tripping stone or an indispensable pillar of tort law. Either way, it remains true that toxic tort causative allegations and the resulting determinations are often factually wrong. This has significance for political speech in two ways. First, allegations that the defendant has made misrepresentations to the government can form the basis of alleged bad conduct that may persuade a jury to “look past a difficult causation issue.” Second, because we know that juries sometimes find causation in the absence of scientific proof, the fraud exception to *Noerr-Pennington* may be invoked where the defendant has accurately argued to government agencies that there is no causal link between its product and a particular disease.

Take a scenario where a plaintiff has alleged that silicone caused her autoimmune disease. The plaintiff also claims that the defendant falsely argued to the FDA that such implants did not cause autoimmune disease. History shows that many juries, for reasons other than scientific truth, accepted the causal assertion. Having done so, the jury could easily believe the defendant’s contrary petition—that breast implants do not cause autoimmune disease—to be false, and thus potentially subject it to the fraud exception to petition immunity. If the plaintiff’s theory is allowed to go to the jury, the defendant would be chilled from advocating a position we now know to be true concerning a significant societal question. Meanwhile, those advocating the ban on breast implants remain free to voice their position to the government, leading to a one-sided (and false) debate on the issue. Government action dependent on whether breast implants do cause autoimmune disease—from bans to funding additional research—is then affected by the artificially lopsided petitioning.

Of course, it is possible to cite instances where defendants disputed a causal truth both in the courtroom and in politics. This only supports the argument: many toxic tort juries found that smoking did not cause lung cancer,²⁴⁹ but it is unthinkable that such findings should limit political discourse on tobacco. In the end, it is better that socially significant causative determinations be informed by any who wish to participate, from the selfless and the selfish alike. The fraud exception,

248. Walter J. Lack, *Three Trial Attorneys*, LOYOLA LAWYER, Winter 2001, available at <http://admin.e1law.lawoffice.com/CM/Walter-Lack-Publications/Three-Trial-Attorneys.asp>.

249. See generally Robert L. Rabin, *A Sociolegal History of the Tobacco Tort Litigation*, 44 STAN. L. REV. 853 (1992) (reviewing unsuccessful waves of tobacco tort lawsuits from the 1950s to 1991).

by injecting tort liability into the process, undermines this premise and should be rejected.

B. Hearing Only One Side of the Special Interests

The Bendectin and breast implant litigation illustrate the political character of the modern toxic tort. In these litigations, the plaintiffs' affiliated entities sought bans. Their success with breast implants then spawned additional cases, strengthening the plaintiffs' positions. More recently, plaintiffs' counsel involved in high profile chromium six cases have actively encouraged the conservative regulation of that chemical²⁵⁰ and used documentary fodder from toxic tort litigation to do so.²⁵¹

The same is true with perchlorate.²⁵² As with breast implants, much of the lobbying and public relations campaigning for plaintiff-friendly environmental laws comes from non-profit environmental groups.²⁵³ The extent to which these groups coordinate with plaintiffs' lawyers is controversial.²⁵⁴ Nonetheless, motive is unimportant. The fact is that environmental groups routinely petition government to adopt positions that benefit toxic tort plaintiffs—whether it is the regulatory assessment of perchlorate,²⁵⁵ arsenic in wood treatment,²⁵⁶ increases in asbestosis,²⁵⁷

250. See *Possible Interference in the Scientific Review of Chromium VI Toxicity*, *supra* note 153. This hearing included an opening by Erin Brockovich and a presentation by counsel involved in the now-settled follow-on to *Anderson v. Pac. Gas & Elec.* The follow-on case, *Aguayo v. Pac. Gas & Elec.*, charged Pacific Gas and Electric with manipulating the Blue Ribbon Panel established to evaluate the carcinogenicity of chromium six. See *id.*; see also David Egilman, *Corporate Corruption of Science—The Case of Chromium (IV)*, 12 INT. J. OCCUPATIONAL ENVTL. HEALTH 169, 169-76 (2006) (citing evidence from chromium six litigation to argue that “[a]s a result of corporate manipulation of science, effective regulation of chromium (VI) in California and New Jersey (and elsewhere) has already been delayed for about a decade. Corporations faced with multi-million-dollar litigation or regulatory actions do not naturally deserve our trust, neither do the paid professionals who help them achieve their goals.”).

251. See *Possible Interference in the Scientific Review of Chromium VI Toxicity*, *supra* note 153.

252. See generally Jennifer Sass, *U.S. Department of Defense and White House Working Together to Avoid Cleanup and Liability for Perchlorate Pollution*, 10 INT. J. OCCUPATIONAL ENVTL. HEALTH 333 (2004) (citing documents from perchlorate toxic tort litigation to argue that defendants had used “science-for-hire” experts to influence NAS perchlorate findings and noting that plaintiffs’ counsel spoke at the same NAS hearing, but did not level the same criticisms at them).

253. See generally Singer, *supra* note 164.

254. Conservative and pro-tort reform organizations often make this assertion. See Bonner R. Cohen, *The Environmental Working Group Peddlers of Fear: Junk Science Specialists Foment Public Health Scares*, CAPITAL RESEARCH CENTER, Jan. 2004, at 4, available at <http://www.capitalresearch.org/pubs/pdf/x3800748694.pdf> (“EWG research dovetail nicely with InjuryBoard.com solicitations.”).

255. See *Group Calls for Higher Standards After Rocket Fuel Toxin Found in Water*, Andrews Litig. Rep.: Toxic Chemicals, Aug. 10, 2001 (EWG petitioning for a

PCB's in salmon,²⁵⁸ benzene in soda²⁵⁹ or Acrylamide in fried foods.²⁶⁰ Engaging in such political speech is, of course, their right. However, the government cannot do its job if the other side of the debate is chilled from arguing its position, fearing that its communication could result in potential liability in toxic tort litigation.

This is all the more true because, to be responsive, a defendant must often frame its petition in terms of risk assessment. While proponents of absolute environmental prohibitions do exist,²⁶¹ regulatory decisions are predominately based on assessing risk and balancing it against attendant costs.²⁶² An MCL for a potential carcinogen, for example, is not based on the proposition that the chemical is dangerous and, therefore, ought to be entirely removed; instead, it is based on the level of the contaminant that "does not pose any significant risk to health,"²⁶³ adjusted for "technological and economic feasibility of compliance."²⁶⁴ The predominance of risk assessment carries forward to site-specific remediation as well. There, the standard is not that of absolute removal, but rather of using risk assessment procedures to determine the necessity

perchlorate standard of 4.3 ppb); *44 Million Women at Risk of Thyroid Deficiency from Rocket Fuel Chemical*, EWG, available at <http://www.ewg.org/node/20902>.

256. See Sara Hoffman, *Arsenic-Treated Wood Linked to Increased Cancer Risk*, *CPSC Says*, 39 TRIAL 87, 87-88 (2003) (discussing EWG's petitions on arsenic regulation).

257. See Sara Hoffman, *Protecting Asbestos Victims*, 40 TRIAL 12, 12 (2004) (discussing ATLA funding of an EWG study, which recommended that asbestos be banned immediately and that a policy ensuring care for future victims be instituted by the U.S. government).

258. See JOHN JANE, ENVIRONMENTAL WORKING GROUP, *PCBS IN FARMED SALMON: FACTORY METHODS, UNNATURAL RESULTS* (2003), available at <http://www.ewg.org/reports/far medPCBs/>.

259. See *Children's Drinks Contain Ingredients that Can Form Benzene, FDA Silent Despite Knowledge of the Problem*, EWG, Feb. 28, 2006, available at <http://www.ewg.org/node/8773> (discussing EWG request that "the FDA immediately issue a statement telling consumers which ingredients in foods and drinks can combine to form benzene").

260. See *New Tests Confirm Acrylamide in American Foods: Snack Chips, French Fries Show Highest Levels of Known Carcinogen, CSPI Calls on FDA to Test More Food*, CSPI, June 25, 2002, available at <http://www.cspinet.org/new/200206251.html> ("CSPI today urged the FDA to inform the public of the risks from acrylamide in different foods.").

261. See, e.g., Amy Sinden, *In Defense of Absolutes: Combating the Politics of Power in Environmental Law*, 90 IOWA L. REV. 1405, 1408 (2005) (lamenting that "cost-benefit analysis is increasingly becoming the standard of choice in environmental law" and instead advocating environmental absolutes as a means of addressing power imbalance).

262. See *id.*; Viscusi, *supra* note 204, at 547 ("Balancing of risk and cost lies at the heart of standard negligence tests and policy analysis approaches to government regulation.").

263. CAL. HEALTH & SAFETY CODE § 116365(c)(1) (West 2008).

264. § 116365(b)(3).

and level of remediation,²⁶⁵ including consideration of costs in selecting remedies.²⁶⁶

Thus, whether engaged in legislative or site-specific lobbying, a petitioning defendant generally must speak in terms of risk assessment and cost/benefit analysis to be responsive to the agency decision at hand. However, by being responsive, the defendant potentially creates tort liability. This is indicated by legal history and juror studies showing the regulatory language of risk assessment to have poor jury appeal. Such evidence, even when the risk assessment is perfectly sound, is reported to have a significant enhancing effect on mock juror punitive damage awards.²⁶⁷

Suppose, for example, that an industry responsible for environmental contamination with chemical X wishes to argue to the EPA that it should adopt an MCL of fifty parts per billion (“ppb”)—meaning that environmental clean-up is not required where the amount of X in the environment is below fifty ppb.²⁶⁸ Non-profit environmental groups advocate an MCL of five ppb or less. Because the EPA determines MCLs based in part on its own standard risk assessment,²⁶⁹ the industry must argue that scientific data demonstrates a risk to human health of “only one in a million.” However, the industry could be chilled from arguing its side of the debate if its submissions to the government were subject to being inserted into a toxic tort lawsuit against it. Researchers have found that jurors view corporate risk assessment as bad conduct. Viscusi, for example, conducted an experiment where mock jurors evaluated five case scenarios, three of which involved a corporate risk assessment.²⁷⁰ He found that corporate risk analysis both significantly increased the probability of punitive damages and increased

265. See U.S. ENVTL PROT. AGENCY, GUIDANCE ON OVERSIGHT OF POTENTIALLY RESPONSIBLE PARTY REMEDIAL INVESTIGATIONS AND FEASIBILITY STUDIES 5-1 (1991) (“The risk assessment also may show that the baseline risks are acceptable and that remediation is not needed. . . . The second major purpose of the Baseline Risk Assessment is to help determine remediation goals for the site contaminants.”); see also 40 C.F.R. § 300.430(e)(7) (2008).

266. See CAL. HEATH & SAFETY CODE § 116365(e).

267. Viscusi, *supra* note 204, at 554.

268. See *Chlorine Chemistry Council v. EPA*, 206 F.3d 1286, 1290 (D.C. Cir. 2000) (describing EPA’s responsibilities under the Safe Drinking Water Act and holding an MCL of zero for chloroform to be arbitrary and capricious when a higher MCL would not have created a significant risk).

269. See *id.* at 1289 (discussing EPA setting cleanup levels “based on an assumption that chloroform poses a risk of cancer at any dose, but that 6 ppb would yield an acceptable cancer risk of one-in-a-million”).

270. Indeed, performing the analysis correctly and placing a higher value on human life actually increased punitive awards, thus placing “companies . . . in the bizarre position of risking greater liability if they place more weight on consumer safety.” Viscusi, *supra* note 204, at 558.

the damage award by 50% on average.²⁷¹ Historic high verdict automobile and pharmaceutical tort cases, where punitive damages were predicated on corporate risk assessment,²⁷² suggest that he is right. Thus, the toxic torts' First Amendment setting necessitates that both sides make petitions;²⁷³ however, potential toxic tort defendants are more likely to be chilled by the adoption of a fraud exception to *Noerr-Pennington*.

Each side also has a litigation incentive to deter the other. Plaintiffs' counsel has a strong financial incentive to chill a defendant's legislative lobbying that might lessen the profitability of the lawyer's present or anticipated toxic tort actions. For example, those with a heavy investment in groundwater chromium six actions have much to lose if regulating agencies conclude that chromium six does present a significant cancer risk through the ingestion route.²⁷⁴ Thus, they have an incentive both to undertake their own legislative lobbying and to undermine a defendant's petitions. The toxic tort defendant, conversely, stands to lose both in terms of tort liability and response costs if the opposite conclusion is reached. These competing incentives parallel those in *Noerr Motor Freight*,²⁷⁵ and the rule that emerged from that case and its progeny both anticipate and protect self-interested petitions.²⁷⁶ Thus, in *Noerr Motor Freight* both the trucking and railroad companies made self-interested petitions, and neither could use tort law as a vehicle for deterring the other from doing so. Private deterrence of political speech, which the fraud exception facilitates, should not be permitted in toxic torts either.

271. See *id.* at 556-58; John MacCoun, *The Costs and Benefits of Letting Juries Punish Corporations: Comment on Viscusi*, 52 STAN. L. REV. 1821, 1825-28 (2000) (criticizing some of Viscusi's reasoning, but ultimately bolstering his conclusion by explaining his results as byproducts of risk assessment establishing foreseeability and intent, and evoking the taboo of trading life for dollars).

272. Viscusi discusses several automobile defective design cases, including the famous Ford Pinto case, *Grimshaw v. Ford Motor Co.*, as well as the pharmaceutical examples of the DPT vaccine and Bendectin, in relation to his results. He also describes how each corporate risk assessment took a prominent place in plaintiffs' jury presentation. See Viscusi, *supra* note 204, at 558-80.

273. See Stephanie Tai, *Three Asymmetries of Informed Environmental Decision Making*, 78 TEMP. L. REV. 659, 673-75 (2005) (discussing various lobbying efforts by regulated entities to influence agency regulations).

274. See CHROMATE TOXICITY REVIEW COMMITTEE, SCIENTIFIC REVIEW OF TOXICOLOGICAL AND HUMAN HEALTH ISSUES RELATED TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF A PUBLIC HEALTH GOAL FOR CHROMIUM (VI) 3 (2001) available at http://www.oehha.ca.gov/public_info/facts/pdf/CrPanelRptFinal901.pdf ("We found no basis in either the epidemiological or animal data published in the literature for concluding that orally ingested Cr(VI) is a carcinogen, and a relatively large number of negative studies by the oral route of exposure, even at concentrations in excess of current MCLs.").

275. See *supra* Part II.A.

276. See *id.*

One article has directly proposed otherwise.²⁷⁷ It recommends that toxic tort plaintiffs' lawyers police defendants' petitions for any "attempt to manipulate inappropriately a state or federal agency risk assessment or standard setting process applicable to the agent."²⁷⁸ As their bounty for finding such manipulation in the system, the plaintiffs' lawyers will then receive a presumption of causation.²⁷⁹ While personal ideology may sanction such a rule, the First Amendment does not. As *Noerr-Pennington* recognizes, the best antidote for speech with which we disagree is counter-speech, not legal retribution. It is axiomatic under settled First Amendment principals that the government and the people it represents are never served if only one side of an argument is heard.²⁸⁰

Further, the moderate middle is the group most likely to be deterred by potential liability, thus leading to more extreme decisions. Although not a valid response to *Noerr-Pennington* immunity, it can be argued that companies with a massive stake in the outcome of a legislative decision will lobby no matter what the tort liability risks. Yet, the same cannot be said of less invested entities—namely those holding a view at odds with the plaintiffs' side, but having little financial stake in the outcome of the decision. Take a medium-sized entity that has mostly finished remediating a trichloroethylene site, and is now weighing whether to comment on proposed agency guidance on such remediation. As part of the remediation, the entity amassed knowledge of the chemical and has opinions on issues that the EPA is considering. However, since the risk assessment will not have much effect on its remediation cost, it has little financial incentive to comment. Unless civic duty overwhelms financial sensibilities, the company is unlikely to gamble that the plaintiffs' lawyers, themselves having a stake in trichloroethylene litigation, would

277. See Thomas O. McGarity, *Proposal for Linking Culpability and Causation to Ensure Corporate Accountability for Toxic Risks*, 26 WM. & MARY ENVTL. L. & POL'Y REV. 1, 55 (2001) (proposing a rule that would hold a defendant liable for non-actionable political petitions, thus reversing *Noerr Motor Freight* and the forty years of jurisprudence applying it, but not mentioning the right to petition).

278. Under the system proposed by Professor McGarity, a plaintiff could establish culpability by:

- (1) a significant violation by the defendant of existing state or federal regulatory requirements governing the sale, distribution, use or disposal of the agent;
- (2) a serious attempt to manipulate inappropriately a state or federal agency risk assessment or standard setting process applicable to the agent; or
- (3) a successful attempt to mislead at-risk members of the public (including the plaintiff) with respect to the nature and magnitude of the risk posed by the agent.

See id.

279. Under Professor McGarity's proposal, causation would be satisfied by a regulatory assessment finding an association, which, as is currently the case, interested parties could comment upon. *See id.*

280. See *E. R.R. Pres. Conf. v. Noerr Motor Freight*, 365 U.S. 127, 144-45 (1961).

perceive its petition as benevolent. Thus, despite having an opinion and information to contribute, the moderate company abstains. Aggregating these factors, the government decision-makers are denied the input of those with a view, but not enough of a stake to brave the potential tort liability of voicing that view. The ultimate government action is worse off and less democratic for it.

It can also be argued in favor of the fraud exception that the truthful petitioner will not ultimately suffer liability for his actions. Given the track record of verdicts in the Bendectin and breast implant litigation, one cannot blame industry for not being sanguine that truth will always be a successful defense. Moreover, unlike the current system where immunity for genuine petitions is absolute and comes at the pleading stage,²⁸¹ immunity that depends on disproving the facts of fraud could take years of costly litigation to even apply. A rational corporation or individual, particularly a moderate one without a financial stake in the politics at issue, could well decide that lobbying is simply not worth the risk. Alternatively, in situations where an entity's circumstances require petitions on an issue that is likely to be controversial, it might hedge the manner in which it communicates with the government, making its speech less effective. Either way, political speech is chilled.

Still, some may argue that petitions by the defense are categorically less worthy than the arguments put forth by their plaintiff counterparts.²⁸² While this proposition may be emotionally appealing to many, its premise—that a constitutional right as fundamental as petitioning one's government may properly be made to depend on negative stereotypes—harkens back to shameful times in American history and would hopefully be accepted by few. Some petitions are more fashionable than others, but history bears out that popularity is not necessarily a proxy for

281. See CAL. CIV. PROC. CODE § 425.16 (West 2008) (setting out California's strategic lawsuit against public participation procedures for challenging actions at the pleading stage).

282. See Amy Sinden, *In Defense of Absolutes: Combating the Politics of Power in Environmental Law*, 90 IOWA L. REV. 1405, 1437-38 (2005). Sinden takes essentially this position in arguing that "this profile of environmental disputants contains two axes of power imbalance, both weighted in the same direction: against the interest in environmental protection," thus requiring the government decision making process to "essentially put a thumb on the scale in favor of the weaker party, and thus counteracting power imbalance." However, she draws her premise of imbalance by framing the contest as between the "average citizen" and the "powerful, monied, corporate interests." *Id.* at 1410. Nowhere does she account for the role played by activist organizations, the media or those with an ideological or financial interest in conservative regulation. Beyond this, it is fundamentally undemocratic for government decisions to be systematically structured to accommodate stereotypes of which side has more "power." See *id.*

justice.²⁸³ So while it is certainly the case that some petitions are both scientifically wrong and morally loathsome,²⁸⁴ the solution dictated by the First Amendment is not to prohibit or deter such speech, but rather to counter it with truth.²⁸⁵

C. *Lawyers over Engineers: The Danger of Tort Liability for Site-specific Lobbying*

Environmental investigations and remediation are a product of interactions between the government, typically in the form of a federal, state or local environmental agency on the one hand, and the entities financially responsible for the cleanup on the other hand.

Every environmental remediation has legal and environmental engineering components. The legal component involves allocation of responsibility for remediating the contamination, while the engineering phase consists of determining and executing the optimal method for cleaning up the environmental contamination. The first stage is the exclusive province of lawyers. A company may, for example, dispute liability under CERCLA²⁸⁶ by arguing that it is not an owner,²⁸⁷ operator²⁸⁸ or arranger of the source of contamination,²⁸⁹ or it may attack the response costs either as unnecessary²⁹⁰ or as not being in compliance with the National Contingency Plan.²⁹¹ Similarly, it may undertake to

283. In his dissent in *Devereaux v. Abbey*, 263 F.3d 1070 (9th Cir. 2001), Justice Kleinfeld observed that the Salem Witch trials were very much a choreographed legal proceeding, rather than the lynch mob phenomena often attributed to them. *See id.* at 1091.

284. *See* Keith E. Sealing, *Blood Will Tell: Scientific Racism and the Legal Prohibitions Against Miscegenation*, 5 MICH. J. RACE & L. 559, 560 (2000) (discussing politics of anti-miscegenation statutes).

285. *See* Ernest Gellhorn, *Public Participation in Administrative Proceedings*, 81 YALE L.J. 359, 361 (1972).

286. *See* 42 U.S.C. § 9607 (2008).

287. *See* *United States v. Monsanto Co.*, 858 F.2d 160, 168 (4th Cir. 1988) (absentee owner of warehouse contending that he was not an “owner” under CERCLA).

288. *See* *United States v. Bestfoods*, 524 U.S. 51, 61 (1998) (defendant corporation arguing that it was not an “operator” of a facility run by its subsidiary).

289. *See* *Gen. Elec. Co. v. Aamco Transmissions, Inc.*, 962 F.2d 281, 284 (2d Cir. 1992) (defendant automotive companies arguing that they were not “arrangers” of the disposals carried out by their franchisees).

290. *See generally* William B. Johnson, *What Are “Necessary Costs of Response” Within the Meaning of § 107(A)(4)(B) of Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act*, 113 A.L.R. FED. 1 (2006) (discussing cases evaluating whether certain costs were “necessary” under section 107).

291. *See* *County Line Inv. Co. v. Tinney*, No. 88-C-550-E, 1989 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 11358, at *1-6 (D. Okla. June 15, 1989) (recognizing that plaintiff failed to establish that its metal detector survey and trenching and sampling event was a remedial investigation/feasibility study, meeting the requirements of the NCP).

spread response costs among other PRPs.²⁹² Each of these issues fall within the lawyers' realm, and not surprisingly, legal commentary on all abound.²⁹³

While attorneys are involved²⁹⁴ in remediation, the company will typically engage technical environmental consultants to actually carry out the remediation.²⁹⁵ Indeed, with the stretching of agency personnel, it is often the case that the agency and the remediating company are both represented by environmental consultants.²⁹⁶

Unlike fights over liability and allocation, the cleanup itself is ideally more a collaboration between engineers than a contest between lawyers²⁹⁷ with success evaluated by the physical mitigation of contaminants. Procedures and nomenclature may vary in state remediation, but the heart of a CERCLA cleanup is a two-phased site

292. See *Cooper Indus. v. Aviall Servs.*, 543 U.S. 157, 161 (2004) (“[A] private party who has not been sued under § 106 or § 107(a) may [not] obtain contribution under § 113(f)(1) from other liable parties.”).

293. See, e.g., Jeannette Paull, *Neither Innocent nor Proven Guilty: The Aviall Services v. Cooper Industries Dilemma*, 13 BUFF. ENVTL. L.J. 31, 32 (2005) (discussing *Aviall* and CERCLA liability framework).

294. See RONALD B. ROBIE ET AL., ENVIRONMENTAL LITIGATION, CALIFORNIA CIVIL PRACTICE § 3:85 (Bancroft-Whitney Co. 1993) (“The determination of cleanup standards is a subjective process and requires negotiations on a case-by-case basis.”). However, even then the actual risk assessment will likely be performed by technical consultants. See Stephen Jones et al., *How to Develop a Brownfield*, 12 ENVTL. COMPLIANCE & LITIG. STRATEGY 4, 4 (observing that the process of negotiating over cleanup standards “usually requires the involvement of environmental risk and technical consultants capable of accurately assessing safe risk-based cleanup standards and promoting efficient and cost-effective remediation techniques”).

295. See ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY, GUIDANCE FOR CONDUCTING REMEDIAL INVESTIGATIONS AND FEASIBILITY STUDIES UNDER CERCLA A-9 (1988), available at <http://rais.ornl.gov/homepage/GUIDANCE.pdf> [hereinafter 1988 Guidance] (“PRPs usually procure the services of consultants to conduct the required RI/FS activities.”).

296. See John F. Seymour, *Liability of Government Contractors for Environmental Damage*, 21 PUB. CONT. L.J. 491, 495 (1992) (Office of Technology Assessment (“OTA”) recognizing that “[o] a large extent, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s Superfund program attempts to manage environmental cleanups by managing contractors” and a DOE five-year plan detailing DOE operations as evidence of the fact that most federal remediation projects are conducted by private contractors); Todd I. Zuckerman, *Informal Discovery Strategies for Environmental Coverage Litigation*, Mealey’s Litig. Rep.: Ins., Oct. 22, 1991 (“Frequently, the lead governmental agency will retain their own consultant to oversee the work of the PRPs’ consultant. If the U.S. EPA is the lead agency, the firm of Camp, Dresser and McKee (“CDM”) is often the overseeing consultant.”).

297. See ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY, GUIDANCE ON OVERSIGHT OF POTENTIALLY RESPONSIBLE PARTY REMEDIAL INVESTIGATIONS AND FEASIBILITY STUDIES 1-7 (1991) [hereinafter PRP Guidance] (noting that the Department of Justice provides “direct assistance” on “Pre-RI/FS Negotiations,” but not on the remediation indicated in the chart of “Oversight Resources”).

investigation known as an “RI/FS.”²⁹⁸ The “remedial investigation” assesses on-site contamination while the “feasibility study” evaluates various remedial alternatives.²⁹⁹ For superfund sites, RI/FS investigations are governed by EPA guidance.³⁰⁰ The actual work is done by environmental consultants;³⁰¹ the EPA reserves the right to reject these consultants if it believes that they lack the required technical expertise.³⁰² The PRP submits a Statement of Work, and must convince the EPA that it has the technical, managerial and financial wherewithal to undertake the work proposed.³⁰³ The PRP’s entitlement to manage the remediation, and thus control its costs, hinges on the agency’s belief that the PRP’s past actions have been in good faith.³⁰⁴ The PRP must also develop Project Plans, including a Sampling and Analysis Plan, a Health and Safety Plan and a Community Relations Plan, all of which must be approved.³⁰⁵ Even if all of the foregoing are approved, the agency will still require constant reports and updating, and likely additional approvals as well.³⁰⁶

The remediation process is technically challenging,³⁰⁷ expensive³⁰⁸ and has been troubled by perceived ineffectiveness, inefficiency and

298. See SUSAN M. COOKE, *THE LAW OF HAZARDOUS WASTE: MANAGEMENT, CLEANUP, AND LITIGATION* 13-20 (Susan M. Cooke ed., MB 1987) (2005).

299. See *id.*

300. See 1988 Guidance, *supra* note 295, at A-9.

301. See *id.* (“PRPs usually procure the services of consultants to conduct the required RI/FS activities.”).

302. See *id.* (“EPA will reserve the right to review the PRPs’ proposed selection of consultants and will disapprove their selection if, in EPA’s opinion, they either do not possess adequate technical capabilities or there exists a conflict of interest.”).

303. See *id.* at A-8.

304. See *id.* at A-2, A-4.

305. See *id.* at 2-16.

306. See 1988 Guidance, *supra* note 295, at A-14.

307. See ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY, *A MANAGEMENT REVIEW OF THE SUPERFUND PROGRAM 1* (1989) [hereinafter *MANAGEMENT REVIEW*]. One of the difficulties with remediation is its technical challenge, especially when compared to the relative success of reducing air emissions under the Clean Air Act. “In the fight to control conventional pollutants in air and water, EPA was able to apply proven technologies to produce fast results. With Superfund no such resource was available.” *Id.* The problem persists: to this day science cannot reliably find the location of DNAPL, or dense non-aqueous phase liquids, such as pure solvents, which can sit on the bottom of an aquifer and feed a groundwater plume indefinitely. See *id.*; see also Mark L. Kram et al., *DNAPL Characterization Methods and Approaches*, 21 *GROUND WATER MONITORING AND REMEDIATION* 109, 110 (2001) (“The current lack of appropriate methods for detecting and delineating widely dispersed microglobules of DNAPL product has been identified as one of the most significant challenges limiting effective cleanup of sites contaminated with these pollutants.”).

308. See *High Cost of Permanent Superfund Cleanups To Result in Interim Actions*, 17 *BNA ENV’T REP.* 778 (1986), available at 17 ER 778 (Westlaw) (Director of EPA’s Office of Waste Programs Enforcement stating that heightened cleanup standards will increase costs from an average of \$9 million per site to between \$30 and \$50 million).

agency indifference almost from its inception.³⁰⁹ The difficulties are not simply technical or a question of management because a remediation is not the sum of those things. While based on engineering and technology, a remediation is a profoundly human endeavor. It understandably draws visceral reactions not only from the affected community, but also from the PRP upon whom the coercive power of the government extracts great sums of money without any need of fault or even causation.³¹⁰ Communication is essential because the most technologically savvy remediation cannot be a success if the community distrusts it and because the government, which lacks the resources to conduct all cleanups, must engage PRPs. Thus, reforms have included the technical and practical, from the increased use of operable units³¹¹ and encouraging the use of innovative technologies³¹² to engendering better communication and cooperation with stakeholders, including the affected public³¹³ and PRPs.³¹⁴ Public participation programs are now an integrated component of cleanups³¹⁵ with the most significant decisions subject to public comment.³¹⁶ Similarly, the policies of the stick and the carrot are used to gain PRP engagement. The stick is increased enforcement,³¹⁷ while the carrot “reward[s] capable and cooperative PRPs by reducing oversight where quality work [is] being performed.”³¹⁸ As part of the latter, the EPA “directs Regions to focus on efforts to engage in open dialogues with PRPs that have settlements with EPA as a

309. See MANAGEMENT REVIEW, *supra* note 307, at 1-6 (discussing existing concerns with Superfund).

310. See 42 U.S.C. § 9601(35) (2008).

311. See Remedial Investigation/Feasibility Study and Selection of Remedy, 40 C.F.R. § 300.430(a)(ii)(A) (2008) (“Sites should generally be remediated in operable units when early actions are necessary or appropriate to achieve significant risk reduction quickly.”).

312. See § 300.430(a)(ii)(E) (“EPA expects to consider using innovative technology when such technology offers the potential for comparable or superior treatment performance.”).

313. See MANAGEMENT REVIEW, *supra* note 307, at 5-1 (discussing the need for aggressive community involvement).

314. See *id.* at 7 (“PRPs choosing to undertake cleanup, even under threat of enforcement action, can expect close cooperation from EPA to move from planning to field remediation as quickly as possible.”).

315. See 40 C.F.R. § 300.430(f)(3)(i).

316. See 40 C.F.R. § 300.430(c)(2)(ii)(A) (stating that the EPA shall “[e]nsure the public appropriate opportunities for involvement in a wide variety of site-related decisions, including site analysis and characterization, alternatives analysis, and selection of remedy”).

317. See MANAGEMENT REVIEW, *supra* note 307, at 2-1.

318. Memorandum from Stephen Luftig, Dir., Office of Emergency and Remedial Response & Barry N. Breen, Dir., Office of Site Remediation Enforcement to Superfund Div. Dirs. (Regions I-X) and Reg’l Counsel (Regions I-X) 1 (May 17, 2000), *available at* <http://www.epa.gov/superfund/programs/reforms/final01.pdf>.

means to promote appropriate oversight that ensures the development and implementation of protective cleanups.”³¹⁹ Settlement is encouraged by giving those who do so “the opportunity to discuss oversight expectations and to provide suggestions on possibilities for conducting oversight in an efficient and effective manner while achieving timely and protective cleanups.”³²⁰

An environmental cleanup is, at both its human and engineering core, an exercise in political speech. Whether it is the resident incensed over a work delay, or the PRP’s consultant advocating a particular soil gas sampling plan, communications with the overseeing agency are perquisites for success.

The danger posed by a sweeping fraud exception to *Noerr-Pennington* immunity is that the necessary communications will be frustrated by interested outsiders not subject to the regulatory process. Take a hypothetical cleanup being conducted by a PRP aware that it presents a tempting toxic tort target (deep pockets, subject to personal jurisdiction in plaintiff-friendly venues, a track record of paying large settlements, etc.), but whom the EPA, the overseeing agency, regards as responsible and technically competent. Following guidelines, the EPA should seek a relationship of open communication and general cooperation between it and the PRP. This would be in the company’s best interest too: by building trust and communicating directly with the agency, it lessens the chances of adverse, unilateral action by the agency and hopefully earns less oversight, thus lowering its overall costs. The PRP may willingly engage in the public participation processes with the affected public. This, after all, can improve its standing with the agency and give the PRP the chance to dispute public opinions it disagrees with while capitalizing on favorable ones. With effective public relations, it may even be able to influence public opinion, and then leverage this to sway the agency toward its point of view.

Nevertheless, these interests are misaligned when the PRP must guard against having third party tort claimants turn its words against it with a fraud exception.³²¹ Currently, the well-intentioned PRP cannot

319. *Id.*

320. *Id.* at 3.

321. Although it does not appear to involve attempts to hold a defendant liable for lobbying contrary to plaintiffs’ position, the currently pending case of *Allgood v. General Motors Corp.*, No. 102 Civ. 1077 DFG TAB, 2006 WL 2669337 (S.D. Ind. Sept. 18, 2006) displays this tension. In that case, PCB toxic tort plaintiffs’ primary property claim sought the recovery of \$78 million, approximately twenty times the value of their properties, for a “hypothetical” cleanup much more intensive than the one then ordered by the EPA. As part of this, plaintiffs advocated a different risk assessment methodology, namely to argue for “clean-up going well beyond the government agencies demands of 1.8 ppm in the soil. Plaintiffs claim to want a clean-up to a standard of 4

engage in direct communication with the agency or the public on potentially controversial technical or human considerations without correspondingly increasing its tort liability. Good environmental engineers may genuinely believe that available analytical and geological data justify focusing future testing on a particular portion of the site to the exclusion of others. In addition, it may be believed that, based on the risk being acceptable per the agency risk assessment guidelines, a less extensive and, therefore, less expensive cleanup is appropriate. From a cleanup perspective, whether ultimately correct or not, these views ought to be directly expressed.³²² Thus, EPA guidance recommends “[w]ork[ing] directly with PRP contractors and encourag[ing] information exchanges between EPA oversight contractors and PRP contractors.”³²³

However, the same communications that would be beneficial to the remediation could be smoking guns in the toxic tort scenario: the PRP may be ultimately wrong about the location of contaminants, or even if entirely correct, will have taken the non-populist position of arguing for less testing. As juries are notoriously unfriendly towards corporate risk assessments,³²⁴ even a textbook risk assessment would likely prejudice a toxic tort jury against a corporation if presented as a basis for liability.

If *Noerr-Pennington* immunity is perforated with a broad fraud exception, then these risks become too serious to ignore, particularly because the well-advised PRP knows that given the difficulties in causation,³²⁵ the existence of “bad documents” can be determinative of whether a toxic tort is brought and whether it is successful. Open engineer-to-engineer communication may produce the technically better cleanup decision, but those communications will necessarily lack the heavy prevalence of caveats and disclaimers present in communications crafted by lawyers to avoid “fraud” allegations—most notably securities disclosures. This harms not only the PRP, who must self-censor, but also the EPA and the affected public. The PRP, through no fault of its own and due to influences it has no ability to control, might exchange its direct, cooperative attitude toward the EPA for a coy, tight-lipped demeanor. In the alternative, a PRP might provide a flood of extraneous information to the EPA so as to avoid allegations of having “concealed”

parts per trillion.” *Id.* In such a case, absent solid *Noerr-Pennington* immunity, a plaintiff could collaterally attack the defendant’s site-specific lobbying, and in doing so, actually bolster his own cause of action. *See id.*

322. *See id.*

323. *Id.* at 7.

324. *See* Viscusi, *supra* note 204, at 588.

325. *See supra* Part V.A.

anything.³²⁶ As a result, the public also loses direct communication. Moreover, with the PRP's tort lawyers screening the interactions of environmental engineers for jury appeal, the odds are that the public will get a less effective cleanup.

An emotionally appealing counterargument is that one should not be able to get away with deceiving the government. However, this argument overstates *Noerr-Pennington* immunity. Deceitful petitions, even if wholly motivated by a desire to influence a government decision, are commonly censured by the wronged agency.³²⁷ For example, consider a garden-variety *Noerr-Pennington* situation of an individual filing a false police report against a neighbor he dislikes. Barring an actual prosecution and acquittal, the falsely accused neighbor cannot sue in tort.³²⁸ However, the reporting neighbor can unquestionably be criminally prosecuted for filing the false police report.³²⁹ Environmental law is no different, and there are already abundant deterrents to dishonesty in remediation. The PRP who is caught lying risks his relationship with the agency and may also face criminal liability.³³⁰ Deceit in applications or reports to state agencies is specifically criminalized in the major environmental statutes, such as the Clean Air

326. Although addressing federal preemption, and not the right to petition, the Court's discussion in *Buckman Co. v. Plaintiffs' Legal Comm.*, 531 U.S. 341 (2001), pertaining to the conflict between FDA's responsibility for approving devices and state law theories predicated tort liability on alleged fraudulent statements to the FDA, is illustrative. *See id.* at 348. In finding that this same tension supported preemption, the Court observed "fraud-on-the-FDA claims would also cause applicants to fear that their disclosures to the FDA, although deemed appropriate by the Agency, will later be judged insufficient in state court." *Id.* at 351. Furthermore, the Court noted that "[a]pplicants would then have an incentive to submit a deluge of information that the Agency neither wants nor needs, resulting in additional burdens on the FDA's evaluation of an application." *Id.*

327. *See* *Accord Balt. Scrap Corp. v. David J. Joseph Co.*, 237 F.3d 394, 403 (4th Cir. 2001) (declining to apply fraud exception because "[i]f [defendant] did indeed misrepresent facts to the court, the proper remedy here is through Maryland law, whether it be through the sanctioning process of the state bar, the state Rules of Civil Procedure, or another similar process" (internal citations and quotations omitted)).

328. *See supra* Part II.A.

329. *See* CAL. PENAL CODE § 148.5(a) (West 2008) ("Every person who reports to any peace officer listed in Section 830.1 or 830.2, or subdivision (a) of Section 830.33, the Attorney General, or a deputy attorney general, or a district attorney, or a deputy district attorney that a felony or misdemeanor has been committed, knowing the report to be false, is guilty of a misdemeanor.").

330. *See* Crimes and Criminal Procedure, Fraud and False Statements, 18 U.S.C. § 1001 (2008) ("[W]hoever, in any matter within the jurisdiction of the executive, legislative, or judicial branch of the Government of the United States, knowingly and willfully . . . falsifies, conceals, or covers up by any trick, scheme, or device a material fact . . . makes any materially false, fictitious, or fraudulent statement or representation; or . . . makes or uses any false writing or document knowing the same to contain any materially false, fictitious, or fraudulent statement or entry . . . shall be fined under this title, imprisoned not more than 5 years.").

Act,³³¹ the Clean Water Act,³³² RCRA,³³³ and the Toxic Substances Control Act.³³⁴ At the very least, misrepresentations may result in the denial or revocation of permits, which are necessary for a company's operations.³³⁵

These punishments should not necessarily deter open communication. Unlike post hoc allegations of fraud made by third parties, the PRP can be confident that the punishment will not be invoked unless the agency believes it was actually deceived.³³⁶ For example, *Pacific Lumber Co.*, although involving a governmental third party, is illustrative of this difference between agency and third party allegations of deceit. In this case, defendant interacted extensively with one agency, CDF, for three years to have its environmental impact report approved.³³⁷ It submitted one report with inaccurate data, but corrected it before a decision was made.³³⁸ At this point, a petitioner could reasonably conclude that there was no issue of deceit. If the agency indicated otherwise, the petitioner could have responded within the context of the three-year proceedings. Moreover, had CDF found actual deceit, which seems highly unlikely based on the facts of *Pacific Lumber Co.*, it could have levied severe sanctions up to the summary denial of the company's application.³³⁹ Under this framework known to both the petitioner and the agency, the petitioner can reasonably predict and mitigate concerns that a particular petition is misleading. As a result, speech is not chilled.

The situation is far different when an allegation of fraud comes from a third party dissatisfied with the administrative result. When this occurs, the third party may cull the record for a "misrepresentation" in order to impugn the defendant's testimony. In *Pacific Lumber Co.*, it was a county district attorney, presumably concerned with the effects of

331. See 40 C.F.R. § 70.11 (2008).

332. See 33 U.S.C. § 1319(c)(4) (2008).

333. See 42 U.S.C. § 6928(d)(3) (2008).

334. See 15 U.S.C. § 2622 (2008). California maintains comparable state statutes. See, e.g., CAL. HEALTH & SAFETY CODE § 25186(d) (West 2008) (providing for the revoking of a permit for "[a]ny misrepresentation or omission of a significant fact or other required information in the application for the permit, registration, or certificate, or in information subsequently reported to the department or to a local officer or agency authorized to enforce this chapter pursuant to subdivision (a) of Section 25180"); § 25189(a) ("Any person who intentionally or negligently makes any false statement or representation in any application, label, manifest, record, report, permit, or other document filed, maintained, or used for purposes of compliance with this chapter, shall be liable for a civil penalty not to exceed twenty-five thousand dollars (\$25,000) for each separate violation or, for continuing violations, for each day that violation continues.").

335. See *id.*

336. See *Buckman Co. v. Plaintiffs' Legal Comm.*, 531 U.S. 341, 348 (2001).

337. See *Gallegos v. Pac. Lumber Co.*, 158 Cal. App. 4th 950, 950 (Ct. App. 2008).

338. See *id.* at 971.

339. See CAL. CODE REGS. tit. 14, § 898.2(c) (2008).

the agency's determination on the residents of his county, and not the CDF, that claimed that the CDF was deceived. The quality of the allegations reflected this. Plaintiff could not cleanly allege that incorrect data was considered by the CDF.³⁴⁰ Moreover, the timing of the allegedly false petition could not serve as a helpful argument because the correct data was submitted before any decision was made, and the favorable determination of which plaintiff complained followed traditional lobbying rather than the submission of the incorrect data.³⁴¹ This case indicates that, unlike allegations from the agency itself, it is not reasonable for a petitioner to expect that third party allegations of deceit will be limited to instances in which the agency is actually deceived.

In sum, a broad fraud exception to *Noerr-Pennington* is a net harm to effective environmental remediation. By creating uncertainty as to whether a given petition will be granted immunity, the risk-balancing PRP is necessarily more guarded with its petitions, thus frustrating the goal of open communication between the agency and the PRP. Society gains no benefit for this price. Agencies already have tremendous power to punish PRPs for fraud; therefore, it is unlikely that the prospect of potential liability for private third parties would increase the deterrent effect among those who seek to mislead agencies.

VI. Conclusion

Under longstanding Constitutional principles, citizens cannot deter each other from petitioning their government with the threat of tort liability, regardless of the popularity of their respective positions or the type of claim made. Currently, that rule is in good stead, but the threat of its being undermined by a sweeping fraud exception exists.

If simple allegations of fraud, ubiquitous in modern pleadings, can defeat petition immunity, then the immunity effectively ceases to exist. The modern toxic tort illustrates this danger. Political speech on important social issues can be forced, under threat of tort liability, to conform to litigation allegations and findings. Whether the allegation is site-specific deception or taking positions contrary to plaintiffs' on legislative issues, if permitted by an immunity-swallowing fraud exception, the overall effect will be the deterrence of open communication with the government when it is most needed. Environmental cleanups benefit greatly from the relationships, ideas and cooperation that free communication between the agency, public and remediating companies engender. Conversely, the prospect of third parties with their own financial interests, trolling those communications

340. See *Pacific Lumber Co.*, 158 Cal. App. at 970 n.113.

341. See *id.* at 971.

for litigation fodder can only hamper open discourse. Moreover, the public is further harmed when one side of an environmental debate can quiet his opponent's voice with the threat of tort liability.

The law, as it should, still sharply favors free political speech. There remains, however, an undercurrent to reverse this by allowing freely dispensed fraud allegations to defeat petition immunity. To be moved by this undercurrent is to accept private punishment as a consequence of petitioning, and thus trample upon free political speech.