IS THE BANKRUPTCY CODE AN ADEQUATE MECHANISM FOR RESOLVING THE DISTRESS OF SYSTEMICALLY IMPORTANT INSTITUTIONS?

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I. INTRODUCTION

The President1 and members of Congress2 are considering proposals that would give the government broad authority to rescue financial institutions whose failure might threaten market stability. These systemically important institutions include bank and insurance holding companies, investment banks, and other “large, highly leveraged, and interconnected” entities that are not currently subject to federal resolution authority.3 Interest in these proposals stems from the credit crisis, particularly the bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers. That bankruptcy, according to some observers,4 caused massive destabilization in credit markets for two reasons. First, market participants were surprised that the government would permit a massive market player to undergo a costly Chapter 11 proceeding. A very different policy had been applied to other systemically important institutions such as Bear Stearns, Fannie Mae, and Freddie Mac. Second, the bankruptcy filing triggered fire sales of Lehman assets. Fire sales were harmful to other non-

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3. FINANCIAL REGULATORY REFORM, supra note 1, at 23.

distressed institutions that held similar assets, which suddenly plummeted in value. They were also harmful to any institution holding Lehman’s commercial paper, which functioned as a store of value for entities such as the Primary Reserve Fund. Fire sales destroyed Lehman’s ability to honor these claims.

Lehman’s experience and the various bailouts (of AIG, Bear Stearns, and other distressed institutions) have produced two kinds of policy proposals. One calls for wholesale reform, including creation of a systemic risk regulator with authority to seize and stabilize systemically important institutions. Another is more modest and calls for targeted amendments to the Bankruptcy Code and greater government monitoring of market risks. This approach would retain bankruptcy as the principal mechanism for resolving distress at non-bank institutions, systemically important or not.

Put differently, current debates hinge on one question: is the Bankruptcy Code an adequate mechanism for resolving the distress of systemically important institutions? One view says “no,” and advances wholesale reform. Another view says “yes, with some adjustments.” This Essay evaluates these competing views:

II. THE CURRENT BANKRUPTCY-BASED APPROACH

The Bankruptcy Code has, since its enactment, taken steps to mitigate systemic risk. This is the risk that one debtor’s failure will infect other financial market participants, causing a chain reaction of insolvencies that destabilizes markets. The Code attempts to mitigate this risk through “safe harbors” for swaps, repos, and other financial contracts. When a debtor enters bankruptcy, non-debtor


7. See infra Sections II and III for a discussion of the current bankruptcy-based approach and other non-bankruptcy approaches.

counterparties can terminate these contracts, exercise netting and setoff rights, and seize margin to the extent of the debtor’s net obligations to the counterparties. These safe harbors allow counterparties to extricate themselves quickly from contracts with a failing debtor and thereby minimize their exposure to its distress.

These provisions, however, are largely prophylactic: they aim to reduce the risk of systemic failure, not to manage a clear and present danger of a market meltdown. That danger exists when a major institution collapses. With or without the Code’s safe harbors, the institution’s failure will destabilize markets. Its failure infects financial markets through three channels. First, and most obviously, the institution will suspend payments on commercial paper and other debt instruments. This can have profound effects on financial markets because, when an institution is very large, its debt instruments are widely held. This was true of Lehman Brothers. After its failure, we saw important funds “break the buck,” producing losses for investors or fund sponsors. Additionally, major market players may have sold credit default swaps (“CDS”) to holders of a failing institution’s debt. As the institution fails, payments under these CDS could destabilize the protection sellers, assuming they have not fully hedged their positions.

Second, the Code’s safe harbors permit premature liquidation of failing institutions. Non-debtor counterparties rush to terminate existing contracts, dismembering the failing institution and preventing an orderly wind-down that might yield greater overall value to counterparties. As these counterparties suffer significant losses, they too may encounter financial distress. When Lehman Brothers entered bankruptcy in September 2008, it was party to about 1.5 million transactions with over 8,000 counterparties. Within two weeks, eighty percent of those transactions had been terminated, netted, and liquidated. Significant value

9. Morrison & Riegel, supra note 8, at 645.
10. Id. at 642; Edwards & Morrison, supra note 8, at 97–98.
11. These funds include the Reserve Primary Fund (the oldest money market fund) and BNY Mellon Institutional Cash Reserves (a securities lending fund). See Condon, supra note 5 (reporting that Reserve Primary Fund dropped below one dollar per share); Matthew Keenan & Christopher Condon, BNY Mellon, Reserve Primary Rattle Fund Investors, BLOOMBERG.COM, Sept. 18, 2008, http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601087&sid=aLCm3FmG9zX4 (reporting that BNY Mellon’s Institutional Cash Reserves fell below one dollar per share).
was lost, some critics allege, because no party—Lehman, a trustee, or a judge—could implement an orderly wind-down process.\textsuperscript{16}

Third, and perhaps most important, rushed liquidation of a failed institution will be accompanied by large-scale efforts to sell off margin and rehedge positions by non-debtor counterparties.\textsuperscript{17} A counterparty will enter financial contracts with a financial institution in order to hedge other risky investments on the counterparty’s balance sheet. The financial contract will often be collateralized: the parties will periodically pledge liquid securities (“margin”) to collateralize their expected obligations to each other. When an institution fails, counterparties will net their outstanding contracts with the institution and seize margin to the extent that the institution is a net obligor. As margin is sold en masse, the price of the underlying collateral falls. Because the underlying collateral is typically composed of liquid securities that function as collateral for many market players, these players will see their assets decline in value. Additionally, as counterparties attempt to rehedge simultaneously, the price of hedging will rise precipitously, creating additional losses for the counterparties. Fear of these effects prompted the Federal Reserve to orchestrate a bailout of Long Term Capital Management (“LTCM”) in fall 1998.\textsuperscript{18} Some critics believe that Lehman’s bankruptcy similarly contributed to the subsequent freezing of credit markets.\textsuperscript{19}

The failure of a systemically important institution will, therefore, destabilize markets regardless of whether the Bankruptcy Code offers safe harbors for financial contracts. Indeed, these safe harbors may exacerbate the instability by permitting a counterparty “run” on the failing institution.

The government’s response, thus far, has been to bail out institutions before they fail (AIG, Bear Stearns) or perform triage afterward (Lehman).\textsuperscript{20} The government’s ability to respond has, according to some officials, been hamstrung by legal constraints. Indeed, one view of Lehman’s bankruptcy is that the

\textsuperscript{16} E.g., McCracken, supra note 15 (reporting that Lehman Brother’s internal analysts estimated as much as $75 billion of Lehman’s value destroyed by chaotic bankruptcy filing). Also, the close-outs occurred in a market that was weakened as a result of Lehman’s failure and had huge price swings in CDS for names like GMAC, AIG, Morgan Stanley, and Goldman Sachs. See, e.g., Morgan Stanley’s CDS Lead Credit Spreads Wider, \textit{Reuters}, Oct. 10, 2008, http://www.reuters.com/article/rbssFinancialServicesAndRealEstate News/idUSN1036473720081010 (reporting that credit markets weakened in anticipation of credit-default swaps on Lehman’s debt, affecting firms such as Morgan Stanley).

\textsuperscript{17} See Edwards & Morrison, supra note 8, at 99–106 (recounting circumstances surrounding rushed liquidation of LTCM).

\textsuperscript{18} Id. at 100.

\textsuperscript{19} See, e.g., Carrick Mollenkamp et al., Lehman’s Demise Triggered Cash Crunch Around Globe; Decision to Let Firm Fall Marked a Turning Point in Crisis, \textit{Wall St. J.}, Sept. 29, 2008, at A1 (reporting that Lehman Brother’s collapse sent credit markets into disarray).

government was powerless to prevent it. The Federal Reserve can make loans, as it
did to Bear Stearns and AIG, if the borrower posts sufficient collateral.\footnote{David Small & James Clouse, The Limits the Federal Reserve Act Places on the Monetary Policy Actions of the Federal Reserve, 19 ANN. REV. BANKING L. 553, 560–65 (2000).} Lehman, however, was highly insolvent and lacked adequate collateral, according to
government officials,\footnote{See, e.g., Confirmation of Mr. Timothy F. Geithner to Be Secretary of the U.S. Department of Treasury, 111th Cong. 82–83 (2009) (statement of Timothy Geithner, Treasury Secretary Nominee, answering questions from Sen. Snowe) (explaining government’s attempt to avoid Lehman’s default once it was evident that firm could not fund itself); Joe Nocera & Edmund L. Andrews, Running a Step Behind as a Crisis Raged, N.Y. TIMES, Oct. 23, 2008, at A1 (reporting that Federal Reserve could not bail out Lehman because it did not have enough assets to serve as collateral); Bernanke, supra note 20 (arguing that Lehman’s failure was unavoidable, given firm’s lack of collateral and legal restraints upon Federal Reserve).} which rendered it ineligible for assistance. This account has been questioned,\footnote{See, e.g., Editorial, Questions for Mr. Geithner, N.Y. TIMES, Dec. 15, 2008, at A34 (arguing that Federal Reserve had insufficient information when deciding to let Lehman fail).} but has helped fuel proposals that would give the government broad authority to address the limits of bankruptcy law.

III. NON-BANKRUPTCY OPTIONS

Congress and regulators are now considering two options: enact insolvency legislation for non-bank institutions or modify Chapter 11 to accommodate these institutions. The former is favored by President Obama;\footnote{See generally FINANCIAL REGULATORY REFORM, supra note 1 (outlining Obama administration’s proposed reforms, including legislation aimed at failing non-bank financial institutions).} the latter by Republicans in the House of Representatives.\footnote{See supra note 6 for sources explaining Republican position on regulatory reform.}

A. Insolvency Legislation for Non-Banks

Under this approach, the federal government would have power to seize systemically important institutions and dictate their futures—reorganization, sale, or liquidation—in order to minimize effects on financial markets and costs to taxpayers.\footnote{FINANCIAL REGULATORY REFORM, supra note 1, at 76–79.} These institutions might be barred from filing a bankruptcy petition, or the government might be given the right to intervene in a bankruptcy case, stripping the court of jurisdiction.\footnote{A similar right of intervention is possessed by the Securities Investor Protection Corporation (SIPC) in stockbroker liquidations under Chapter 7. See generally 11 U.S.C. § 742 (2006); Daniel J. Morse, When a Securities Brokerage Firm Goes Broke: A Primer on the Securities Investment Protection Act of 1970, 25 AM. BANKR. INST. J. 34 (2006).}

To be effective, this approach to systemic risk should have three elements: (i) a clear definition of “systemically important institutions,” (ii) transparent procedures for rescuing these institutions, and (iii) a broad regulatory framework that guides the relevant federal agency and the financial institutions before the institutions hemorrhage.
Definitions

A “systemically important institution” would likely be one that (i) falls within a category of institutions that have an important presence in financial markets and (ii) whose failure would threaten market stability. Category (i) almost surely includes any institution subject to prudential regulation, including investment banks, money market funds, and mutual funds. Although hedge funds currently sit outside the scope of most regulations—a situation that will likely change in the near future—\textsuperscript{28} the LTCM bailout suggests that they too form a class of institutions that is systemically important.

An institution falls within category (ii) if it is sufficiently large, leveraged, complex, and capitalized by illiquid assets that its failure would destabilize markets.\textsuperscript{29} Even if an institution does not achieve a massive scale, it can still be systemically important if it is behaving similarly to a large number of institutions that are systemic as part of a “herd.”\textsuperscript{30}

Legislation could establish the types of institutions within category (i). Category (ii) requires judgment from a regulator, who must decide whether an institution’s scale or comovement with other firms renders it systemically important. That judgment could be given to the relevant regulator for the industry, or it could be given to a single decision maker such as the Federal Reserve. If discretion is given to industry regulators, the benefits are industry-specific expertise and regulatory competition; the costs are regulatory capture and politically charged exercise of discretion. If discretion is given to a single regulator, the benefits are greater (but still incomplete) political insulation and centralized decision making; the cost is a lack of industry-specific expertise.\textsuperscript{31} These are theoretical cost-benefit tradeoffs; in practice, the comparison is very muddy, leaving no obvious basis for preferring a single regulator over multiple regulators.

\textsuperscript{28} See, e.g., \textit{Financial Regulatory Reform}, \textit{supra} note 1, at 37–38 (proposing that hedge funds be required to register with SEC and Commodity Futures Trading Commission).

\textsuperscript{29} Along these lines, the Treasury has proposed three factors that may help identify systemically important institutions:

- the impact the firm’s failure would have on the financial system and the economy;
- the firm’s combination of size, leverage (including off-balance sheet exposures), and degree of reliance on short-term funding; and
- the firm’s criticality as a source of credit for households, businesses, and state and local governments and as a source of liquidity for the financial system.

\textit{Id.}

\textsuperscript{30} \textsc{Markus Brunnermeier et al.}, \textit{The Fundamental Principles of Financial Regulation} 25–26 (Int’l Ctr. for Monetary & Banking Studies 2009).

2. Rescue Procedures

The relevant agency must be given fairly broad power to wind down, reorganize, or sell off a distressed institution. Commercial banking law provides a useful template. The Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation (“FDIC” or “the Corporation”) has authority to seize control of a commercial bank that is approaching (or has entered) insolvency or has engaged in conduct signaling fraud or unsound risk management practices. Once it intervenes, the FDIC has broad power to succeed to the institution, operate it, revoke its charter, remove management, and choose whether to liquidate the bank or reorganize it. The FDIC’s decisions are not subject to court oversight or notice and hearing requirements. The FDIC’s mandate is to resolve bank insolvencies in ways that achieve the lowest cost to federal deposit insurance funds.

Five broad strategies are available:

(1) Purchase and Assumption. The FDIC may transfer the failing bank to a solvent institution. This is a rapidly executed strategy: a bank may be seized on Friday and its balance sheet transferred to a solvent bank before the opening of business on Monday. To make the transaction attractive to the acquiring bank, the FDIC may agree to share losses from risky assets or compensate the acquirer if transferred liabilities exceed the value of assets. Of course, this payment often functions as full insurance for creditors of the failed bank; they may suffer no haircut as a result of the bank’s failure. Critics therefore argue that “purchase and assumption” transactions can generate excessive costs (borne by the federal deposit insurance funds) as well as moral hazard (because creditors are insensitive to a bank’s riskiness). Strategies analogous to “purchase and assumption” were

32. Intervention is necessary, for example, when a bank is “critically undercapitalized,” defined as equity capital representing two percent or less of total assets. 12 U.S.C. § 1831o(b)(1)(E), (c)(3) (2006). If an institution becomes critically undercapitalized, the FDIC is required to restrict its activities in statutorily prescribed ways. Id. § 1831o(i). The FDIC may appoint a receiver at any time within 90 days. Id. § 1831o(h). This rule prevents federal regulators from gambling on bank resurrection.

33. Id. § 1821(c)(5).

34. Id. § 191(a). See generally JONATHAN R. MACEY ET AL., BANKING LAW AND REGULATION ch. 10 (3d ed. 2001) (discussing FDIC’s broad authority once it intervenes to rescue failing or threatened bank).

35. James Madison Ltd. v. Ludwig, 82 F.3d 1085, 1092–93 (D.C. Cir. 1996). Judicial review is available for the decision to impose a receivership or conservatorship, but not for subsequent decisions by the federal agency. Id.


37. Id. §§ 1821(d)(2)(G), 1823(c)(2)(A)(iii).

38. For a useful, oft-quoted, but somewhat outdated summary of the process, see Gunter v. Hutcheson, 674 F.2d 862, 865–66 (11th Cir. 1982).


40. FED. DEPOSIT INS. CORP., supra note 39, at 29.

41. See FED. DEPOSIT INS. CORP., supra note 39, at 20–21, for a summary of these critiques.
applied to Bear Stearns and WaMu, both sold to JPMorgan. In the first case, however, the sale was orchestrated by the Federal Reserve, not the FDIC.

(2) Bridge Banks and New Banks. The FDIC may capitalize a new bank that assumes the balance sheet of a failed institution. The new bank may be a temporary measure (a “bridge bank”) that exists only while the FDIC identifies the best resolution of the failed bank’s operations, a process that can take up to two years. Or the new bank may be a permanent institution—a new bank—whose stock the FDIC will eventually sell to investors (the stock can be sold to private investors, such as private equity firms). In either case, the FDIC can transfer all or part of a failed institution’s balance sheet. Creditors cannot object but are entitled to recoveries at least as large as they would receive in a liquidation. Last year, the FDIC chartered a bridge bank to salvage the operations of Silverton Bank.

(3) Receivership and Liquidation. The FDIC can assume the role of receiver, marshal and liquidate bank assets, pay depositors or transfer their accounts to another institution, and then distribute the remaining value in the estate to other claimants. The procedure is typically used when no healthy institution is willing to acquire the failing bank’s balance sheet. Critics argue that a version of receivership and liquidation should have been applied to Lehman to ensure an orderly wind-down.

44. 12 U.S.C. § 1821(d)(2)(F), (m). If an initial public offering (“IPO”) of the bank’s stock fails, the FDIC must arrange a purchase and assumption transaction or liquidate the new bank within two to five years of its origination. Id. § 1821(m)(17). New banks must be wound up within two years, but the FDIC has discretion to extend the life of a bridge bank for three additional one-year periods. Id. § 1821(n)(9).
45. Id. § 1821(c)(5); Fed. Deposit Ins. Corp., supra note 39, at 37.
49. Id. at 41.
50. The “disorderly failure” of Lehman was, in part, the motivation for President Obama’s proposal for “the creation of a resolution regime to allow for the orderly resolution of failing” institutions “in situations where the stability of the financial system is at risk.” Financial Regulatory Reform, supra note 1, at 76; see also Regulating and Resolving Institutions Considered “Too Big to Fail,” supra note 4 (advocating new regulatory approach for important financial institutions). See generally Nouriel Roubini, Op-Ed., We Need a New Insolvency Regime for Banks, FORBES.COM, Mar. 26, 2009, http://www.forbes.com/2009/03/25/banks-nationalization-fdic-bankruptcy-opinions-columnists-insolvency-roubini.html.
(4) Conservatorship and Government Assistance. The federal government has authority to appoint itself as conservator of a bank—without revoking its charter—and operate it with a view toward rehabilitation.51 Until recently, the FDIC rarely employed this strategy.52 In mid-2008, the Corporation was designated conservator for IndyMac, a federal savings bank.53 About two months later, another federal agency—the Federal Housing Finance Agency (“FHFA”)—became conservator for the government-sponsored entities (“GSEs”) Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac.54 The Housing and Economic Recovery Act of 200855 created the FHFA to regulate the GSEs.56 The statute grants the FHFA authority to appoint a conservator after determining that a GSE is critically undercapitalized.57 Pursuant to this authority, the FHFA appointed itself conservator of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac on September 7, 2008.58 Having arrogated all powers possessed by shareholders, directors, and officers, it implemented a plan under which the Treasury Department will provide up to $100 billion in financing in exchange for warrants to purchase up to 79.9% of the GSE’s common stock (at a price of $0.00001 per share).59 The Housing and Economic Recovery Act places no limit on the length of the conservatorship.60

(5) Open Bank Assistance. The FDIC can inject liquidity into troubled banks if the transfer will prevent a likely receivership or conservatorship, the transfer will prevent the bank from breaching capital reserve requirements, and the bank’s managers are competent and have not violated any laws or regulations.61 This strategy is, of course, controversial because it protects both creditors and shareholders from the bank’s financial distress.62 A version of open bank

52. FED. DEPOSIT INS. CORP., supra note 39, at 69 n.2 (“[T]he FDIC has never been appointed conservator by the OCC or a state regulatory authority and may decline the appointment if tendered; the FDIC was appointed conservator once by the Office of Thrift Supervision [in the case of IndyMac].”).
57. Id. § 4617.
59. JICKLING, supra note 54, at 3.
62. FED. DEPOSIT INS. CORP., supra note 39, at 47.
assistance was applied to AIG, with the Federal Reserve injecting $85 billion in return for equity participation notes.\(^6\)

Strategies along these lines could be among the powers available to a systemic risk regulator. Instead of minimizing the cost to federal deposit insurance funds, which is the goal of the FDIC,\(^6\) the regulator would minimize the cost to creditors, financial markets, and the public from the failure of a systemically important institution. Affected parties might have a right of appeal, but the regulator would have discretion to select the appropriate strategy without prior court approval.

3. Regulatory Framework

Rescue legislation cannot exist in isolation. Because it vests the federal government—the Treasury, the Fed, or an agency—with enormous discretion, the legislation must be tied to a broad regulatory framework that limits government discretion and gives clear guidance to institutions that are subject to potential takeover.

Again, commercial banking law provides a useful analogue. Long before it fails, a bank is subject to ongoing, prudential regulation by state or federal regulators.\(^6\) This regulation includes capital reserve requirements,\(^6\) limits on lending\(^6\) and other investment activities,\(^6\) and periodic reports\(^6\) and audits.\(^7\) The relevant state or federal regulator is charged with the responsibility for initiating any conservatorship or receivership.\(^7\) Similarly, the GSEs and Federal Home Loan Banks are subject to regulations governing their capitalization and business practices, and their regulator, the FHFA, is the decision maker with respect to initiation of any conservatorship or receivership proceedings.\(^7\)

Prudential regulation serves three critical functions. First, it reduces the moral hazard caused by deposit insurance or any other form of government insurance.\(^7\)

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64. See 12 U.S.C. § 1823(c)(4) (providing that FDIC may exercise authority only at least possible cost to federal deposit insurance funds, and prescribing methods of determining least costly approach).
65. See generally MACKEY ET AL., supra note 34, at 70–73.
67. See id. § 84(a) (prescribing formulas to tie lending limits to collateral).
68. See id. § 24 (restricting equity investments in corporations).
69. See id. § 161 (requiring institutions to provide reports to Comptroller of Currency regarding condition of institution and payment of dividends).
70. See id. § 1820(d) (mandating annual on-site examinations for all insured institutions).
71. See generally MACKEY ET AL., supra note 34, at 725–26 (discussing process of appointing fiduciary to manage bank’s affairs).
73. See STUART I. GREENBAUM & ANSAN V. THAKOR, CONTEMPORARY FINANCIAL INTERMEDIATION 443 (2d ed. 2007) (posing that public regulation is necessary to reduce moral hazard).
Insurance dulls the incentives of the insured parties—the bank and its creditors or depositors—to monitor and, if necessary, reduce the riskiness of the bank’s activities. This moral hazard problem necessitates vigorous monitoring by the insurer. We see this in the detailed reporting and auditing requirements of bank regulations. Second, prudential regulation ensures that both the regulator and the public receive timely information about a commercial bank’s condition long before distress occurs. When the FDIC does intervene to rescue a bank, there will be a long paper trail that justifies the intervention. Finally, prudential regulation cabins FDIC discretion by establishing objective, often quantifiable, standards for determining whether conservatorship or receivership is justified.

Laws governing failing banks, then, have always been tied to a framework regulating healthy banks. Without a similar framework, rescue legislation would be deeply troubling because it would give the government wide-ranging, politically sensitive discretion in selecting “distressed” institutions for a federal takeover. In the absence of rules guiding the behavior of regulators and financial institutions, government decisions will be biased by political pressure. For example, fear of adverse political or public reaction could delay a much-needed rescue. A timely rescue will often be one that occurs when an institution has not yet defaulted or entered distress. The rescue may seem premature to outsiders, even if the agency believes that the company is in danger of default. And there will indeed be a real risk of premature rescue. Because reasonable minds can disagree whether an institution is “in danger of default,” politics can enter the decision-making process (consciously or subconsciously).

Additionally, without a regulatory framework, the relevant federal agency might have insufficient information to make timely rescue decisions. And, as noted

74. See id. (noting that deposit insurance and other government safeguards intended to protect private banks ultimately move costs and risks from banks to public and disincentivize banks’ self-regulation).

75. See id. at 445 (analogizing moral hazard problem in fire insurance policies to banking industry).

76. See supra notes 65–72 and accompanying text for a discussion of bank regulation requirements.

77. Inadequate information may have contributed to the current crisis. See RICHARD A. POSNER, A FAILURE OF CAPITALISM: THE CRISIS OF ’08 AND THE DESCENT INTO DEPRESSION 145–46 (2009) (stating that housing bubble started to deflate in 2005, but government did not discover problem in banking industry until fall 2008).


79. See POSNER, supra note 77, at 134–39 (discussing why warning signs were largely ignored and highlighting difficulty in pacifying public when attempting to prevent “unlikely” events from happening).

before, rescue legislation could even increase systemic risk, because it would dampen the monitoring incentives of creditors, investors, and other private actors. Prudential regulation is needed to address this moral hazard problem.

To be sure, prudential regulation will not eliminate concerns about regulators abusing their discretion. Even though the FDIC and FHFA operate within a comprehensive regulatory framework, their rescue decisions are not immune to criticism. But the goal of legislation is not to remove discretion from federal actors—that is impossible. The goal is to constrain it in ways that limit ill-informed or biased decisions. That is possible, but only through legislation that channels the decision making of systemically important institutions as well as the government actors empowered to rescue them.

B. Modifying Chapter 11

The rescue powers of the FDIC—receivership, conservatorship, purchase and assumption, creation of a bridge bank, etc.—are similar to those of a judge in a Chapter 11 case. Once an institution files for bankruptcy, it enjoys insulation from creditors (the “automatic stay”). The bankruptcy judge can then approve gradual liquidation (akin to a receivership), reorganization (conservatorship), or sale of all or part of the institution’s assets, together with financing provided by the government or another lender (purchase and assumption).

81. See Tyler Cowen, Why Creditors Should Suffer, Too, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 5, 2009, at BU1 (emphasizing that new proposals effectively protect creditors of big financial firms from “their own lending and trading mistakes”).

82. E.g., Francis X. Diebold & David A. Skeel, Jr., Geithner Is Overreaching on Regulatory Power, WALL ST. J., Mar. 27, 2009, at A11 (stating that FDIC did not assume control of IndyMac until after it had clearly failed).


84. A firm can file a bankruptcy petition under Chapter 7 liquidation, id. §§ 701–784, or Chapter 11 reorganization, id. §§ 1101–1174. Liquidation can be accomplished under either chapter. See generally Douglas G. Baird, The Elements of Bankruptcy ch. 1 (4th ed. 2006). Circuit City, for example, underwent liquidation in Chapter 11. See Miguel Bustillo, Retailer Circuit City to Liquidate—Consumer-Electronics Pioneer Closing; 34,000 Workers Will Lose Jobs, WALL ST. J., Jan. 17, 2009, at B1 (reporting that Circuit City liquidated after failing to reorganize under Chapter 11).


These features make bankruptcy a potentially attractive mechanism for rescuing distressed institutions, including systemically important ones.87 One obvious problem is the safe harbors for financial contracts, discussed in Section II. Financial contracts are the primary—often the only—assets of financial institutions, and the safe harbors permit a “run” on these assets.

One solution is to eliminate the safe harbors, at least when a systemically important institution files for bankruptcy. Some members of Congress, for example, advocate creation of a new chapter of the Bankruptcy Code for financial institutions.88 Presumably this chapter would closely resemble Chapter 11, but the automatic stay would apply to all financial contract counterparties in order “to prevent runs on troubled institutions, thereby helping to alleviate the panic that could strike the financial system if a large institution finds itself facing difficulties.”89 Other details remain to be worked out. The debtor would probably be limited in its ability to “cherry pick” or otherwise use the benefit of hindsight to gamble at the expense of financial contract counterparties. The debtor might also be given strict deadlines for disaffirming contracts. In this way, bankruptcy judges would be given authority—with respect to financial contracts—similar to that possessed by the FDIC in commercial bank insolvencies.90 Even with these fixes, however, the Bankruptcy Code would remain a poor fit for systemically important institutions. By the time an institution becomes obviously distressed, and its managers finally consider a bankruptcy filing, counterparties will have commenced a “run” on its assets and confidence in the financial system will have deteriorated. It seems unlikely that troubled institutions will seek bankruptcy protection before they exhibit signs of distress. The incentive to “gamble for resurrection”—to delay bankruptcy as long as possible—will be very strong, particularly because equity holders generally receive nothing and managers often lose their jobs after a bankruptcy filing.

To be sure, a distressed institution can be forced into bankruptcy via an involuntary petition. Under current law, only a group of creditors with unpaid, unsecured claims can file such a petition.91 That could be changed. Perhaps the federal government could be given broad authority to file involuntary petitions against systemically important institutions, regardless of whether it is a creditor. But this power would be as troubling as proposals for a systemic risk regulator. Would the government possess sufficient information and proper incentives to file an involuntary petition at the appropriate time against the appropriate institutions? A broad regulatory framework would be needed to ensure that this happens. Of course, a bankruptcy judge could dismiss a premature involuntary

88. REPUBLICAN MEMBERS OF THE H. COMM. ON FIN. SERVS., supra note 6, at 3.
89. Id.
bankruptcy petition, but the filing itself conveys negative information to the market and undermines confidence in the systemically important institution.92

A second problem is that the bankruptcy process is managed by a judge. Though federal regulators are subject to political pressure, they possess expertise that is generally beyond the ken of judges. When a systemically important institution suffers distress, rapid decision making is necessary. Federal law permits this kind of speed when the FDIC seizes a bank.93 Most of the Corporation’s decisions, for example, are not subject to judicial review. Speed is less likely in a bankruptcy case because the judge must offer due process to objectors.94 Though the Lehman bankruptcy was handled very quickly—the North American operations were sold to Barclay’s within a week95—it seems overly optimistic to expect that every bankruptcy judge would act with the same dispatch as the judge did in the Lehman bankruptcy case.96

The deficiencies in the bankruptcy process can be overcome, provided the government is willing to pay enough. It can intervene before a bankruptcy occurs by bailing out the troubled institution (as in AIG and Bear Stearns). It can also intervene afterwards by offering financing tied to strict covenants that force a quick reorganization or liquidation (as in Chrysler and GM).97 These measures are costly, but the costs impose a salutary brake on overeager regulators, particularly because they face public scrutiny when they use public funds to bail out failing institutions.


93. See supra Section III.A.2 for an analysis of the rescue procedures and strategies available to the FDIC.


96. A third problem is the international scope of most, if not all, major financial institutions. Any rescue will require extensive coordination with foreign governments, something bankruptcy courts are not well equipped to handle.

Put differently, little in the current regime prevents the federal government from conducting quick rescues and pursuing other measures to mitigate a systemic collapse. The current regime is just more costly for taxpayers when systemically important institutions fail than one that permits immediate federal takeover. These costs must be weighed against the costs of a system that permits federal takeovers. That system requires a massive regulatory apparatus to constrain agency discretion.

IV. CONCLUSION

Returning to the key question: Is the Bankruptcy Code an adequate mechanism for resolving the distress of systemically important institutions? No. The government needs a process with more flexibility and speed than what the Code offers. Although the government can avoid the Code’s constraints by bailing out or extending loans to failing institutions, the cost to taxpayers is too large.

President Obama has proposed a plausible alternative to the Code. It would vest the Federal Reserve—working with the Secretary of the Treasury, FDIC, and other federal regulators—with authority to act as a systemic risk regulator that monitors, regulates, and rescues any foreign or domestic financial institution whose “material financial distress . . . could pose a threat to . . . United States financial stability or the . . . United States economy.” The proposed legislation combines close monitoring of institutions before they enter distress and FDIC-style resolution procedures when the institution craters. Importantly, it gives the federal government authority to place institutions into conservatorship or receivership only when their distress imperils the overall economy. If an institution is “critically undercapitalized” but its distress does not threaten market stability, the institution will be forced into bankruptcy instead of receivership or conservatorship. President Obama’s proposal, therefore, invokes alternatives to bankruptcy only when economic conditions necessitate them. Plus,
these alternatives are invoked by the same regulators that monitor systemically important institutions long before they fail. These features render the President’s plan a viable, targeted approach to protecting financial markets and the overall economy from a financial institution’s failure.

Complicated issues remain, of course. If the FDIC does place an institution in receivership, some but not all assets and liabilities may be transferred to a stable purchaser or bridge bank. For example, an investment bank’s financial contracts portfolio—but not its real estate, bonds, and commercial paper—might be transferred to a bridge bank. The government may believe that market stability is threatened by quick liquidation of the portfolio, but that quick liquidation of real estate or defaults on bonds and commercial paper create no systemic risk. In a case like this, how should the left-behind assets and liabilities—the “rump”—be handled?\(^{105}\) There will, for example, be complicated questions about the relative priority of creditors and whether pre-receivership payments to creditors or equity holders should be clawed back. Should these questions be resolved by the FDIC, or should the rump be transferred to a bankruptcy court for administration? The bankruptcy court will apply well-established rules; FDIC decision making is more opaque. An investment bank’s bonds and commercial paper may be easier to value—and therefore more liquid—if they are subject to transparent bankruptcy rules in the event of a receivership. Important issues such as these must be resolved before systemically important institutions are subject to a new resolution regime. But these issues are largely details and should not detract from the broader lesson of the financial crisis: the Bankruptcy Code is not an adequate mechanism for resolving the distress of systemically important institutions.

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