Symposium: Confronting New Market Realities: Implications for Stockholder Rights to Vote, Sell, and Sue

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Introduction

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A defining characteristic of the corporation is its allocation of rights, responsibilities, and power among three groups—the board of directors, officers, and stockholders. By statute, the board is tasked with managing the business and affairs of the corporation. Recognizing that managing the day-to-day operations of a corporation is not always feasible for a board of directors, corporate law allows the board to delegate its authority and, most often, this authority is delegated to the officers. In the typical public
corporation, it is the officers who are given vast amounts of power and responsibility for running the business of the corporation. In contrast to the board and officers, stockholders play a much more limited role in the management of the corporation. Stockholders are able to participate in corporate governance primarily through their rights to (1) vote, (2) sell, and (3) sue. These rights may be used alone or in combination to influence corporate management and decision making, directly and indirectly.

The following excerpt provides a description of each of these stockholder governance rights:

1. Vote. The shareholder franchise is a key part of corporate law, but that does not mean that shareholders vote on very many things. Most business decisions are left entirely to the board of directors or those to whom they delegate such authority. Shareholders participate only infrequently in a limited set of decisions, including the election of directors, fundamental corporate changes, and ratification.

   a. Election of directors. Directors are usually elected annually, but this pattern can be varied by the corporation's articles of incorporation or other private ordering. Shareholders also have the power to remove directors in some circumstances.

   b. Fundamental corporate changes. Mergers and similar transactions require the approval of shareholders as well as directors and, thus, are an exception to the usual rule that leaves corporate decisions entirely in the hands of the directors. Of course, even here the directors act as gatekeepers: The shareholders can vote only on those transactions that are recommended to them by the directors.

others is not, however, limited to just the officers of the corporation. See Grimes, 1995 WL 54441, at *8-9.

4. See 1 R. FRANKLIN BALOTTI & JESSE A. FINKELSTEIN, THE DELAWARE LAW OF CORPORATIONS AND BUSINESS ORGANIZATIONS § 4.10[B] (3d ed. 2014) (stating that “normally it is the officers to whom the primary functions of management are delegated”); Ribstein, supra note 1, at 188 (“[T]he corporate form of centralized management involves dividing management between professional full-time executives who manage the firm day-to-day and directors who oversee the board and set policy.”).

c. Ratification. Shareholders occasionally vote on the ratification of self-dealing transactions by interested directors. The vote can cleanse the transaction of any taint or shift the burden of proof in a legal challenge.

2. Sell. The ability to sell one's shares is a core right for shareholders and one that corporate law has, for the most part, left to the market. Appraisal—or dissenter's rights—is a rare exception where corporate law guarantees shareholders the right to sell their shares. Ordinarily, under corporate norms, a shareholder must obtain liquidity not from the corporation but from the market, if there is one. That is not to say that corporate law does not assume an important role for the ability to exit. Free transferability of shares and limited liability—both core characteristics of the corporate form—facilitate liquidity through the market. Many corporate rules take their specific shape because they exist in the shadow of a market for shares.

3. Sue. In addition to voting and selling, a shareholder's ability to sue serves as a constraint on the actions of managers and is a regular part of the governance matrix. Litigation rights of shareholders include derivative suits, direct suits and class actions, and inspection and other ancillary rights.

a. Derivative suits. In particular circumstances, such as breaches of fiduciary duty by those in control of the corporation, all states permit a shareholder to bring a suit in the name of, and on behalf of, the corporate entity. This type of suit is an exception to the usual rule that directors act for the corporation. It occurs when directors are disabled by conflict or are otherwise unable to meet their fiduciary duty. In response to the fear that a self-appointed shareholder would bring a “strike suit” to harass the corporation or its directors, various procedural rules developed to balance the potential for abuse against the monitoring value of such lawsuits.

b. Direct suits and class actions. Shareholders can also bring direct suits, which may be class actions if numerous shareholders are affected by common questions. In contrast to derivative suits, in which the loss to the shareholder is derivative of the harm to the collective enterprise, direct suits may be brought for an injury that the shareholder feels individually, such
as deprivation of a right to vote or a contract right. Such suits under state corporate law have increased in recent years. They may be based on fraud under state common law or on statutory remedies.

c. Inspection and other ancillary rights. Shareholders also have ancillary rights at state law, such as the right to inspect the books and records of the corporation, including the list of shareholders. Such inspection may be the first salvo in a litigation battle, an effort to sell shares, or a voting campaign.6

The traditional portrayal of stockholders in the modern American public corporation has been one of geographically dispersed, small stakes, mom-and-pop holders.7 Stockholders were largely passive individual investors, deferring to the decisions of corporate managers and relying heavily on market forces to serve as a check on management’s power.8 Accordingly, the problems of collective action and rational apathy among stockholder populations were central in corporate governance discussions.

Today, however, corporate commentators have observed a movement away from the traditional account of stockholders, in particular at public corporations. Professors Gilson and Gordon have observed that the distribution of shareholdings of U.S. public corporations has migrated from household ownership to largely institutional investors.9 The emergence of institutional and activist stockholders has compensated for some of the problems identified with the traditional public corporation stockholder base (e.g., collective action, rational apathy). However, as Gilson and Gordon explain in their research, this shift presents its own set of unique


governance challenges. In addition to the dramatic change in the composition of a public corporation’s stockholder base, many new realities—technological advancements, regulations providing for new ways to invest in corporations, evolving transaction structures, changing litigation strategies, and amendments to federal securities laws, to name

10. Gilson & Gordon, supra note 9, at 889-902 (discussing the problems related to today’s “agency capitalism”). Institutional investors in particular are well-suited to solve collective action problems:

Institutional investors, because of their large ownership percentages, can overcome the problem of collective action in influencing corporate governance. Further, institutional investors tend to be more knowledgeable than individual stockholders and are less likely to be able to take advantage of selling their stock when they become frustrated with corporate management. This means that institutional stockholders tend to be better positioned and have more of an incentive to carry out the traditional role envisioned for stockholders — monitoring and enforcing board and officer conduct and engaging management in a conversation about how the corporation should be run. There are of course concerns that arise when you begin to talk about the role of institutional stockholders.


a few—have impacted the ability of stockholders to meaningfully participate in corporate governance. Similar to the shift in the composition of public corporations’ stockholder bases from individual to institutional holders, these changes to the business and legal environment in which stockholders and their corporations operate pose new questions and challenges for corporate governance.

In this symposium issue, the authors use stockholders’ rights to vote, sell, and sue as a platform for discussion of these new market realities for public corporations.16 Professors Randall S. Thomas and Afra Afsharipour begin the issue by focusing on the right to vote. Professor Thomas and co-author Patrick C. Tricker explore the exercise and effectiveness of the stockholder franchise in two areas—the election of directors and approval of management proposals—and provide recommendations for further areas of investigation and research.17 Meanwhile, Professor Afsharipour examines how stockholder approval intersects with the bidder overpayment problem in merger and acquisition transactions.18

Next, Professors James J. Park, Joan MacLeod Heminway, and Charles R. Korsmo focus on different aspects of a stockholder’s right to sell his/her/its interest in the corporate enterprise. Professor Park analyzes how federal regulation of corporate governance can serve to counter limitations on the efficacy of stockholders’ right to sell as a means of protecting

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16. In addition to the authors in this symposium issue, I would also like to thank Vice Chancellor J. Travis Laster, Dean D. Gordon Smith, and John Mark Zeberkiewicz for taking the time to participate in, and make insightful presentations at, the symposium.


themselves from poor corporate governance. Professor Heminway’s article takes a closer look at the right to sell in the developing area of crowdfunded equity securities. In particular, she offers insight into how the transfer restrictions inherent in this type of investment affect stockholders’ financial and governance rights. Professor Korsmo then discusses how the right to sell has expanded from the classic view of selling one’s shares of stock to include stockholders’ ability to sell the legal claims attendant to their shares and the implications for combatting managerial opportunism.

Finally, Professors Jessica M. Erickson and Sean J. Griffith examine the ability of stockholders to sue the corporation and its management. Professor Erickson looks at the initial stages of stockholder litigation, specifically the need for gatekeepers in stockholder litigation in order to maintain the right to sue as a tool to control managerial costs. Further, she analyzes the need to tailor the use and type of gatekeeper to the particular type of stockholder litigation. Addressing a later phase of stockholder litigation, Professor Griffith and co-author Anthony A. Rickey focus on the settlement of merger class actions. Pointing out how current formulations of the settlement process in merger class actions—in particular, the recent proliferation of disclosure settlements—undermine the right to sue in corporate governance, Griffith and Rickey offer insight into how stockholder objections to settlements can correct some of the shortcomings in the settlement approval process and reinvigorate the proceeding with a more adversarial posture.

While individually the contributions to this issue focus on different areas of stockholders’ governance rights, each article also highlights broader issues related to the changing dynamics surrounding public corporations. In particular, the articles in this issue raise important questions such as (1) whether a stockholder governance right functions differently today (for better or worse) than what corporate doctrine originally envisioned, (2) what are the emerging issues related to prominence of institutional

23. Id.
stockholders, and (3) what areas of the law still need to adapt to new market realities. To that end, the articles in this issue serve as a reminder of the necessity for corporate governance structures to be continually reevaluated and refined to account for the ever-changing legal and economic conditions under which corporations operate.