The Equal Credit Opportunity Act, Regulation B, and Spousal Guarantees: The Missouri Court of Appeals for the Eastern District’s Incorrect Decision to Uphold the Validity of Regulation B’s Expanded Definition of “Applicant” in Frontenac Bank v. T.R. Hughes, Inc.

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THE EQUAL CREDIT OPPORTUNITY ACT, REGULATION B, AND SPOUSAL GUARANTEES: THE MISSOURI COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE EASTERN DISTRICT’S INCORRECT DECISION TO UPHOLD THE VALIDITY OF REGULATION B’S EXPANDED DEFINITION OF “APPLICANT” IN FRONTENAC BANK V. T.R. HUGHES, INC.

INTRODUCTION

Congress passed the Equal Credit Opportunity Act (ECOA) in 1974 to ensure that financial institutions and businesses make credit available on a fair and impartial basis without discrimination on the basis of sex or marital status.¹ Prior to the passage of the ECOA, women faced difficulties in gaining access to credit. For instance, single women had more trouble getting credit than single men, creditors were often unwilling to extend credit to a married woman in her own name, and women who were divorced or widowed had trouble reestablishing credit.² To eliminate these difficulties and help women gain access to credit, the ECOA makes it “unlawful for any creditor to discriminate against any applicant on the basis of sex or marital status . . . .”³ If a creditor is found to have violated the ECOA, the ECOA provides that “[a]ny creditor who fails to comply with any requirement imposed under this subchapter shall be liable to the aggrieved applicant for any actual damages sustained by such applicant . . . .”⁴

³. Equal Credit Opportunity Act § 701(a), 88 Stat. at 1521 (emphasis added) (The 1976 amendment to the ECOA broadened its coverage by making it unlawful for any creditor to discriminate against any applicant “on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, sex or marital status, or age”). The ECOA is currently codified at 15 U.S.C. § 1691 (2012).
⁴. 15 U.S.C. § 1691e(a). Section 1691e(c) further provides: “Upon application by an aggrieved applicant, the appropriate United States district court or any other court of competent jurisdiction may grant such equitable and declaratory relief as is necessary to enforce the requirements imposed under this subchapter.” Id. § 1691e(c). In Boone National Savings & Loan Ass’n v. Crouch, the Missouri Supreme Court discussed § 1691e(c) and stated that “[m]any cases have utilized this provision as authority for allowing a debtor to assert violations . . . as a counterclaim for recoupment or as an affirmative defense to collection actions even after the running of the two year statute of limitations.” Boone Nat’l Sav. & Loan Ass’n v. Crouch, 47 S.W.3d 371, 374–76 (Mo. 2001) (en banc) (internal citations and quotes omitted). While Missouri allows for an ECOA violation to be asserted as a counterclaim or as an affirmative defense, other
“Congress mandated that the agency charged with overseeing [the] ECOA—first the Federal Reserve [Board], now the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau—promulgate regulations to carry out the statute’s purposes.”\(^5\) Pursuant to this authority, the Federal Reserve Board ("the Board") issued Regulation B ("Reg. B") to prohibit creditors from discriminating against creditworthy applicants on the basis of sex or marital status.\(^6\) In particular, Reg. B was designed "to curtail the practice of creditors who refused to grant a wife’s credit application without a guaranty from her husband."\(^7\) Accordingly, Reg. B provides that "a creditor shall not require the signature of an applicant’s spouse or other person . . . if the applicant qualifies under the creditor’s standards of creditworthiness . . . ."\(^8\) Reg. B further provides that "if, under a creditor’s standards of creditworthiness, the personal liability of an additional party is necessary to support the credit requested, a creditor may request a . . . guarantor . . . [and] [t]he applicant’s spouse may serve as [the guarantor], but the creditor shall not require that the spouse be the [guarantor]."\(^9\)

At first glance, the ECOA and Reg. B appear to be consistent in that they both prohibit creditors from discriminating against credit applicants on the basis of sex or marital status. However, the ECOA and Reg. B are inconsistent courts have held that an alleged ECOA violation cannot be asserted as an affirmative defense. The ability, or lack thereof, to assert the ECOA as an affirmative defense has significant implications. See Ami L. diLorenzo, Regulation B: How Lenders Can Fight Back Against the Affirmative Use of Regulation B, 8 U. MIAMI BUS. L. REV. 215, 217–18 (2000) ("The question courts find themselves facing is precisely what form the remedy [for an ECOA violation] should take. Debtors attempt to utilize the purported violation as an affirmative defense to payment. The reason debtors seek to have the Equal Credit Opportunity Act claim treated as an affirmative defense is because this will likely preclude the entry of summary judgment. If the Equal Credit Opportunity Act claim is treated as an affirmative defense and there is supporting evidence, the court is faced with a factual dispute to be resolved at trial. As a result, the guarantor will continue to obtain a delay in facing judgment. Lenders, on the other hand, seek to have the Equal Credit Opportunity Act claim treated as a compulsory counterclaim, thereby permitting the guarantor to pursue its claim separately from the lender’s motion for judgment. Treating the Equal Credit Opportunity Act claim as a counterclaim is strategically significant because the court can grant the lender summary judgment on the defaulted obligations despite the potential Equal Credit Opportunity Act violation. Moreover, if treated as a counterclaim, the Equal Credit Opportunity Act cannot be used to declare the underlying obligation void.").

\(^5\) RL BB Acquisition, LLC v. Bridgemill Commons Dev. Grp., LLC, 754 F.3d 380, 383 (6th Cir. 2014) (internal quotes omitted).

\(^6\) Equal Credit Opportunity Act (Regulation B), 12 C.F.R. § 202.1(b) (2013).

\(^7\) Hawkins v. Cmty. Bank of Raymore, 761 F.3d 937, 942 (8th Cir. 2014) (internal quotes omitted).

\(^8\) 12 C.F.R. § 202.7(d)(1). This provision further provides that "[a] creditor shall not deem the submission of a joint financial statement or other evidence of jointly held assets as an application for joint credit." \(^9\) Id.

\(^9\) Id. § 202.7(d)(5) (emphasis added).
in how they define the term “applicant.” Under the ECOA, the term “applicant” does not include guarantors and is defined as “any person who applies to a creditor directly for extension, renewal, or continuation of credit, or applies to a creditor indirectly by use of an existing credit plan for an amount exceeding a previously established credit limit.”

Reg. B, however, alters the ECOA’s definition of “applicant” to explicitly include guarantors. Specifically, Reg. B provides that “applicant” means “any person who requests or who has received an extension of credit from a creditor, and includes any person who is or may become contractually reliable regarding an extension of credit . . . [including] guarantors . . . .”

Reg. B’s broad definition of “applicant” has had significant implications for Missouri creditors making loans to commercial enterprises, which are not creditworthy. In these situations, the personal guaranty of the business owner and the business owner’s spouse are part of the transaction. This is because, under Missouri law, “co-ownership of property by a husband and wife creates a presumption of tenancy by the entirety,” and, as a result, “[a]n execution arising from a judgment against one spouse alone cannot affect property held by a husband and wife as tenants by the entireties.” Therefore, the execution of the guaranties allows the creditor to reach marital property in the event of default and is “sound commercial practice unrelated to any stereotypical view of a wife’s role.”

But how can creditors lawfully obtain a spouse’s guaranty without requiring it? In most cases, creditors sidestep Reg. B by having the applicant “offer” the spousal guaranty, which creditors then “accept” instead of “require.” This scenario has become commonly referred to as the “Reg. B Dance.” But, despite creditors’ deliberate efforts to avoid violating Reg. B’s spousal signature provisions, creditors continuously face resistance to their efforts to enforce spousal guarantees after husband-business owners default on their loans. Specifically, because Reg. B gives applicants and guarantors the authority to sue under the ECOA, wife-guarantors are using the ECOA as a means to render their spousal guarantees invalid and unenforceable.

11. 12 C.F.R. § 202.2(e) (emphasis added).
12. Under the ECOA and Reg. B, business entities are considered “persons” and, therefore, qualify as applicants. See 15 U.S.C. § 1691a(f) (“The term ‘person’ means a natural person, a corporation, government or governmental subdivision or agency, trust, estate, partnership, cooperative, or association.”); 12 C.F.R. § 202.2(g) (“Business credit refers to extensions of credit primarily for business or commercial . . . purposes . . . .”) (emphasis omitted).
14. Id. at 942–43 n.6.
In 2012, the Missouri Court of Appeals for the Eastern District decided *Frontenac Bank v. T.R. Hughes, Inc.*  

15. *Id.* at 290–91.

16. *Id.* at 290–91.


21. *Id.*

credit—i.e. a borrower—and does not include a person who simply gives security for a borrower’s debt—i.e. a guarantor. Indeed, because guarantors base their ECOA claims on allegations that the creditor improperly required their guarantee, they are admittedly conceding that they are not applicants because they did not apply for or request anything. Under the second prong of *Chevron*, Reg. B fails because it unreasonably impedes the purpose of the ECOA, which is to encourage creditors to include, rather than exclude, women (especially wives) from credit transactions. Instead, Reg. B discourages creditors from considering a wife’s creditworthiness when extending credit to the wife’s husband because of the potential risk that the wife’s guarantee will be deemed void and unenforceable. Reg. B’s definition of “applicant” also leads to circular and illogical results because it allows a guarantor-wife to assert that she should not be a member of the class of people Reg. B is designed to protect—i.e. guarantors—and simultaneously allows the wife to claim rights under the ECOA as a guarantor.23

Part I of this Note details the background of the ECOA and Reg. B, and provides an in-depth analysis of the *Frontenac Bank* court’s decision. Part II examines state and federal case law addressing the validity of Reg. B’s definition of “applicant.” Part III explores the legislative history of the ECOA in order to shed light on Congress’s purpose in passing the ECOA. Part IV asserts that the *Frontenac Bank* court misinterpreted the Missouri Supreme Court’s decision in *Boone* and should have followed the line of cases which have held Reg. B’s definition of “applicant” to be invalid. Specifically, Part IV demonstrates that the Board’s expansion of the term “applicant” fails under both prongs of the *Chevron* analysis. Part V concludes that the United States Supreme Court should correctly determine that Reg. B’s definition of “applicant” is an invalid exercise of the Board’s regulatory authority.

I. BACKGROUND

A. *The Equal Credit Opportunity Act and Regulation B*

   The ECOA was enacted on October 28, 1974, in response to Congress’s finding “that there [was] a need to insure that the various financial institutions and other firms engaged in the extensions of credit exercise[d] their responsibility to make credit available with fairness, impartiality, and without discrimination on the basis of sex or marital status.”24 Accordingly, the ECOA provides that its purpose is “to require that financial institutions and other firms engaged in the extension of credit make that credit equally available to all creditworthy customers without regard to sex or marital status.”25

23. *Id.*
25. *Id.*
Ultimately, Congress believed that the ECOA would enhance economic stabilization and strengthen competition among financial institutions engaged in the extension of credit.  

To achieve the ECOA’s purpose, Congress made it “unlawful for any creditor to discriminate against any applicant on the basis of sex or marital status with respect to any aspect of a credit transaction.” The ECOA defined “applicant” as “any person who applies to a creditor directly for extension, renewal, or continuation of credit, or applies to a creditor indirectly by use of an existing credit plan for an amount exceeding a previously established credit limit.” In order to ensure the implementation of the ECOA, Congress authorized the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System the authority to “prescribe regulations to carry out the purposes” of the ECOA.

Pursuant to the authority granted to it under the ECOA, the Board promulgated Reg. B. In accordance with the ECOA, Reg. B provides that its purpose “is to promote the availability of credit to all creditworthy applicants without regard to . . . sex . . . [or] . . . marital status[.]” Under Reg. B, “[a] creditor shall not refuse to grant an individual account to a creditworthy applicant on the basis of sex, marital status, or any other prohibited basis.”

To further the ECOA’s purpose and prevent creditors from forcing married women to obtain their husbands’ guarantees when applying for credit, Reg. B further provides that “a creditor shall not require the signature of an applicant’s spouse or other person . . . if the applicant qualifies under the creditor’s

26. Id.
27. Id. § 701(a), 88 Stat. at 1521 (emphasis added).
29. Equal Credit Opportunity Act § 703, 88 Stat. at 1522. The 2010 amendment delegated the power to prescribe regulations to implement the ECOA to the Bureau of Consumer Financial Protection. See 15 U.S.C. § 1691b(a). Besides the 2010 amendment, the language in this section of the ECOA has remained virtually unchanged and provides that the Bureau’s regulations may contain but are not limited to such classifications . . . and may provide for such adjustments and exceptions for any class of transactions, as in the judgment of the Bureau are necessary or proper to effectuate the purposes of [the ECOA], to prevent circumvention or evasion thereof, or to facilitate or substantiate compliance therewith.
30. Equal Credit Opportunity Act (Regulation B), 12 C.F.R. § 202.1(a) (2013) (“This regulation is issued by the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System pursuant to title VII (Equal Credit Opportunity Act) of the Consumer Credit Protection Act . . . .”).
31. Id. § 202.1(b) (emphasis added). In its entirety, Reg. B provides that its purpose is to “promote the availability of credit to all creditworthy applicants without regard to race, color, religion, national origin, sex, marital status, or age.” Id.
32. Id. § 202.7(a).
standards of creditworthiness.”

Reg. B further provides that “[i]f, under a creditor’s standards of creditworthiness, the personal liability of an additional party is necessary to support the credit requested, a creditor may request a . . . guarantor . . . [and] [t]he applicant’s spouse may serve as [the guarantor], but the creditor shall not require that the spouse be the [guarantor].”

In the context of loans to commercial enterprises, the Official Staff Commentary of Reg. B provides that:

[A] creditor may not take [a] business applicant’s marital status into account, and may not request information about a married applicant’s spouse except when the spouse has some connection to the business . . . [and] [a] creditor must comply with the rules that prohibit requiring the spouse to guarantee the loan.

Additionally, the Official Staff Interpretations of Reg. B provide that:

[Reg. B] bar[s] a creditor from requiring the signature of a guarantor’s spouse just as [it] bar[s] the creditor from requiring the signature of an applicant’s spouse. For example, although a creditor may require all officers of a closely held corporation to personally guarantee a corporate loan, the creditor may not automatically require that spouses of married officers also sign the guarantee. If an evaluation of the financial circumstances of an officer indicates that an additional signature is necessary, however, the creditor may require the signature of another person in appropriate circumstances . . . .

As originally adopted, Reg. B was consistent with the ECOA and defined “applicant” as “any person who requests or who has received an extension of credit from a creditor, and includes any person who is or may be contractually liable regarding an extension of credit other than a guarantor, surety, endorser, or similar party.” However, in 1986, the Board amended Reg. B and redefined an “applicant” as “any person who requests or who has received an extension of credit from a creditor, and includes any person who is or may become contractually reliable regarding an extension of credit . . . [including] guarantors, sureties, endorsers, and similar parties.”

The Board proposed to expand the definition of “applicant” to cover guarantors “in order to give legal standing to persons who have certain rights...”
under [Reg. B] but who do not . . . have a legal remedy when there is a violation of those rights." 39 According to the Board, "[t]he principal effect of [the amendment was] to give guarantors . . . standing under the act to seek legal remedies when a violation occurs." 40 The Board further explained, "The existing regulation prohibits creditors, in certain situations, from requiring an applicant to obtain a guarantor . . . [but] [if] a creditor violates this provision . . . a guarantor whose signature has been illegally required currently has no legal remedy because . . . the act confers standing to sue only upon an 'aggrieved applicant.'" 41 The Board’s proposal also stated, “The Board believes that no operational problems [will] be created by the proposed change.” 42 The Board justified its proposal to include guarantors within the definition of “applicant” on the basis that “[t]he new provisions may increase creditor’s costs by increasing their exposure to litigation . . . [but] this situation [will likely] arise infrequently [because] [a]pplicants would normally bring suit in their own right; and guarantors . . . would merely join in the lawsuit.” 43 In the final rule revising Reg. B, the Board stated, “Litigation would increase to the extent guarantors sue regarding alleged [Reg. B] signature rule violations, and the alleged violations would not have been litigated by applicants themselves.” 44 The Board also emphasized that the amendment “impose[d] no new requirements on creditors.” 45

As a result of Reg. B’s spousal signature provisions and Reg. B’s amended definition of “applicant,” creditors have continuously been forced to litigate claims made by wife-guarantors. Specifically, Reg. B’s broad definition of “applicant” has had significant implications for Missouri creditors making loans to commercial enterprises, which are not creditworthy. 46 In these situations, the personal guaranty of the business owner and the business owner’s spouse are part of the transaction. This is because, under Missouri law, “co-ownership of property by a husband and wife creates a presumption of

40. Id. at 10,891.
41. Id. (emphasis added). By acknowledging that the ECOA confers standing to sue only upon an “aggrieved applicant,” the Board seemingly admitted it was changing, rather than interpreting, the ECOA.
42. Id.
43. Id. at 10,896.
45. Id. at 48,018.
46. Under the ECOA and Reg. B, business entities are considered “persons” and, therefore, qualify as applicants. See 15 U.S.C. § 1691a(f) (2012) (“The term ‘person’ means a natural person, a corporation, government or governmental subdivision or agency, trust, estate, partnership, cooperative, or association.”); 12 C.F.R § 202.2(g) (2013) (“Business credit refers to extensions of credit primarily for business or commercial . . . purposes . . . .”) (emphasis omitted).
tenancy by the entirety,” and, as a result, “[a]n execution arising from a judgment against one spouse alone cannot affect property held by a husband and wife as tenants by the entireties.”47 Therefore, the execution of the guaranties allows the creditor to reach marital property in the event of default and is “sound commercial practice unrelated to any stereotypical view of a wife’s role.”48 But how can creditors lawfully obtain a spouse’s guaranty without requiring it? In most cases, creditors sidestep Reg. B by having the applicant “offer” the spousal guaranty, which creditors then “accept” instead of “require.” This scenario has become commonly referred to as the “Reg. B Dance.”

In the following case, *Frontenac Bank v. T.R. Hughes, Inc.*,49 the creditor, Frontenac Bank (“Frontenac”), faced that exact scenario. Before extending credit to a husband-business owner, Frontenac required the husband to personally guarantee the loan. Additionally, Frontenac “accepted” spousal guarantees from the husband’s wife. Despite Frontenac’s efforts to comply with Reg. B, the wife-guarantor sought to invalidate her guarantees after the husband-business owner defaulted on his loans. The wife-guarantor alleged that Frontenac “required” her guarantee in violation of the ECOA. As a result, the Missouri Court of Appeals for the Eastern District was confronted with an issue of first impression in Missouri state courts: whether the Board’s expansion of the term “applicant” to include guarantors was a valid exercise of the Board’s regulatory authority.

**B. Frontenac Bank v. T.R. Hughes, Inc.**

T.R. Hughes, Inc. (“Homebuilder”) and Summit Point, L.C. (“Summit”) obtained financing from Frontenac in 2003.50 In connection with the financing, Homebuilder and Summit entered into loan agreements, which included seven promissory notes (“the Notes”).51 Homebuilder and Summit secured the loans by executing deeds of trust.52 Additionally, Thomas R. Hughes (“Mr. Hughes”) and his wife, Carolyn Hughes (“Ms. Hughes”), personally guaranteed the Notes.53 In 2009, Frontenac declared the Notes in default, foreclosed upon the real estate,54 and sued Summit, Homebuilder, Mr. Hughes (collectively,

47. Hawkins v. Cmty. Bank of Raymore, 761 F.3d 937, 942 n.6 (8th Cir. 2014) (internal quotes omitted).
48. Id. at 942–43 n.6.
50. Id. at 276.
51. Id.
52. Id.
53. Id.
54. Frontenac Bank, 404 S.W.3d at 276.
“Defendants”), and Ms. Hughes to recover the deficiency balance. Defendants and Ms. Hughes responded by filing several affirmative defenses, including the defense that the guarantees were void, invalid, and/or otherwise unenforceable because Frontenac violated the ECOA.

The circuit court entered summary judgment in favor of Frontenac and against Defendants on Frontenac’s claims relating to the Notes. The circuit court also entered partial summary judgment in favor of Frontenac and against Ms. Hughes, but the court sustained her affirmative defense that Frontenac violated the ECOA when Frontenac obtained her personal guarantees. At trial, the court ruled in favor of Ms. Hughes and concluded her guarantees were obtained in violation of the ECOA. Specifically, the circuit court found that the guarantees “were invalid and unenforceable [and] constituted discrimination based on marital status” because Frontenac “wrongfully demanded that [Ms. Hughes] execute the guarantees [even though Homebuilder and Summit] were independently creditworthy under Frontenac’s own standards of creditworthiness.”

On review, the Missouri Court of Appeals for the Eastern District rejected Frontenac’s contention that the ECOA does not extend to spousal guarantees and affirmed the circuit court’s determination as to Ms. Hughes’s guarantees. The Missouri Supreme Court subsequently declined Frontenac Bank’s motion for transfer from the Missouri Court of Appeals.

1. Legal Background in Missouri Before Frontenac Bank

Prior to Frontenac Bank, the Missouri Supreme Court decided Boone National Savings & Loan Ass’n v. Crouch in 2001, and addressed the issue of whether alleged ECOA violations can be asserted as both a counterclaim and affirmative defense after the statute of limitations has run. In Boone, Boone

55. Id. at 276–77.
56. Id. at 277.
57. Id.
58. Id.
59. Frontenac Bank, 404 S.W.3d at 277.
60. Id.
61. Id. at 291. The court determined that Frontenac violated the ECOA (1) when Frontenac required Ms. Hughes to execute an unlimited personal guaranty because such a guaranty exceeded Reg. B’s exception to the rule against requiring an applicant’s spouse to sign a credit instrument if the applicant is independently creditworthy; and (2) when Frontenac deemed Mr. Hughes’s submission of joint financial statements as an application for joint credit because the ECOA specifically prohibits creditors from deeming the submission of joint statements as an application for joint credit. Id. at 289–91.
63. Boone Nat’l Sav. & Loan Ass’n v. Crouch, 47 S.W.3d 371, 374–76 (Mo. 2001) (en banc). Initially, the trial court granted summary judgment in favor of Boone National on Ms. Crouch’s counterclaim and affirmative defenses on the grounds that the counterclaim was barred.
National Savings and Loan Association ("Boone National") sued Laura Crouch ("Ms. Crouch") on her guaranty for the business debts of her husband, John A. Crouch, M.D. ("Mr. Crouch"). In response, Ms. Crouch asserted Boone National’s alleged violations of the ECOA as an affirmative defense and a counterclaim. The Boone court determined that Ms. Crouch’s counterclaim was time barred because it was "an action" that was required to be brought within the two-year period specified in the [ECOA]. Nonetheless, the court found that Ms. Crouch could assert the alleged ECOA violations as affirmative defenses because the affirmative defenses were "not ‘an action’ that [was] being ‘brought.’"

Aside from the Missouri Supreme Court’s decision in Boone, there were no reported Missouri cases between 2001 and 2012 where a spousal guaranty was invalidated under the ECOA. During that time span, however, several federal cases found that the Board exceeded its regulatory authority by changing Reg. B’s definition of “applicant” to include guarantors and held that the ECOA did not apply to spousal guarantees. Thus, at the time Frontenac Bank came before the Missouri Court of Appeals for the Eastern District, the federal courts’ interpretation of ECOA created a potential conflict on the issue of whether the Board exceeded the regulatory authority granted to it under the ECOA when it changed the ECOA’s definition of “applicant” to include guarantors.

2. Frontenac Bank Court’s Analysis

To determine whether the Board exceeded the regulatory authority granted to it under the ECOA when it changed the ECOA’s definition of “applicant” to under the statute of limitations and the ECOA could not be asserted as an affirmative defense. After opinion, the Missouri Court of Appeals for the Western District ordered the case transferred to the Missouri Supreme Court. The court explained that “under Missouri law, even though a claim may be barred by the applicable statute of limitations, the essence of the claim may be raised as a defense.” The court justified its conclusion by reasoning:

It would be inconsistent with the equitable relief recognized in the [ECOA] to allow a violator to enforce its guaranty claim simply because the victim of the violation had not brought an action within the two-year period. In this case, for instance, Ms. Crouch would have had to bring an action for violation of the Equal Credit Opportunity Act by 1994, which was . . . three years before there was any effort to impose liability upon her for her husband’s debts.

include guarantors, the Frontenac Bank court began its analysis by reviewing the Missouri Supreme Court’s decision in Boone.\textsuperscript{71} The court interpreted Boone as holding that “the ECOA could be asserted as an affirmative defense by a wife in a creditor’s claim to enforce a guaranty.”\textsuperscript{72} Despite the Frontenac Bank court’s determination that the Missouri Supreme Court had already answered the precise issue presented, the court continued its analysis and addressed Frontenac’s argument that the court should abandon Boone and follow various federal cases decided since Boone that held the ECOA did not apply to spousal guarantees.\textsuperscript{73} Specifically, Frontenac argued that the federal cases “rejected the extension of the ECOA and its governing regulations to spousal guarantees as being in excess of regulatory authority based on the express language in the [ECOA].”\textsuperscript{74} In response to Frontenac’s argument, the court reviewed the definition of “applicant” under the ECOA and Reg. B, and emphasized that Reg. B’s definition of “applicant” explicitly includes “guarantors.”\textsuperscript{75} Based on Boone and Reg. B’s definition of “applicant,” the court reasoned that there was no reason why it should abandon the doctrine of stare decisis, and it concluded that Ms. Hughes was protected by the ECOA as a guarantor.\textsuperscript{76}

II. STATE AND FEDERAL CASE LAW ADDRESSING THE VALIDITY OF REGULATION B

A. State and Federal Courts Initially Assumed the Validity of Regulation B

After the Board amended Reg. B’s definition of “applicant” to include guarantors, state and federal courts assumed that the amendment was a valid exercise of the regulatory authority granted to the Board under the ECOA.\textsuperscript{77} For instance, in 1988, the Iowa Supreme Court decided Marine American State Bank of Bloomington, Ill. v. Lincoln, and implied that the amendment was a valid exercise of the Board’s authority.\textsuperscript{78} Although the court there held that the plaintiff did not have standing under the ECOA as a “guarantor, surety, endorser, or similar party” since the amendment did not apply retroactively, the court explained that the amendment represented a “substantive change” in the

\textsuperscript{71} Id. at 291.
\textsuperscript{72} Id.
\textsuperscript{73} Frontenac Bank, 404 S.W.3d at 291.
\textsuperscript{74} Id.
\textsuperscript{75} Id.
\textsuperscript{76} Id.
\textsuperscript{78} Lincoln, 433 N.W.2d at 713.
definition of “applicant” under the ECOA, and it suggested that a similarly situated plaintiff would have authority to sue under the ECOA for violations occurring after the amendment took effect in 1986. Likewise, in 1991, the Colorado Court of Appeals decided *Douglas County National Bank v. Pfeiff* and rejected the defendant bank’s argument that a guarantor was not an “applicant” under the ECOA. Instead, the court held that guarantors do have authority to sue under the ECOA. In determining that the bank’s argument had “no merit,” the court explained that the principal purpose of the amendment was to give guarantors authority to seek legal remedies when an ECOA violation occurs.

In accordance with these state courts, federal courts similarly deferred to the Board’s amendment and assumed Reg. B’s definition of “applicant” was valid. In 1995, the United States Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit decided *Silverman v. Eastrich Multiple Investor Fund, L.P.* and rejected a creditor’s contention that a guarantor-wife lacked the authority to sue under the ECOA. The Third Circuit did not explicitly address the validity of the Board’s amendment to the definition of “applicant.” Nonetheless, the Third Circuit implied that the amendment was valid. Specifically, the Third Circuit relied on the district court’s conclusions that “the ECOA has from its inception prohibited requiring spousal guaranties” and, therefore, “conferring standing upon guarantors places no additional requirements upon creditors . . . .” Similarly, in *FDIC v. Medmark, Inc.*, the United States District Court for the District of Kansas held that a guarantor-wife could “use [an] alleged ECOA violation defensively to obtain relief from her obligation under [a] guaranty . . . .” Although the defendant-bank did not argue that a guarantor lacks the authority to assert a violation of the ECOA, the court implicitly gave deference to the Board’s expanded definition of “applicant” and assumed it was a valid exercise of the Board’s regulatory authority. Specifically, the court noted that the ECOA provides an “aggrieved applicant” the authority to recover damages for a violation and explained that

79. Id. at 712–13 (emphasis added).
81. Id. at 1102–03.
82. Id.
84. *Silverman*, 51 F.3d at 31.
85. Id.
86. Id.
87. Id.
89. Id.
“[t]he term applicant encompasses any person who is or may become contractually liable regarding an extension of credit, including guarantors.”

B. Courts Begin to Split Over the Validity of Regulation B’s Definition of “Applicant”

Notwithstanding the deference state and federal courts initially gave to the Board’s amended definition of “applicant,” the United States Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit questioned the validity of Reg. B’s definition of “applicant” and the applicability of the ECOA to spousal guarantees in Moran Foods, Inc. v. Mid-Atlantic Market Development Co., LLC. Similar to Frontenac Bank, Moran Foods involved a scenario where a wife guaranteed her husband’s debt so that his business could obtain credit. After the business defaulted on its loans, the creditor sought to enforce the wife’s personal guarantee. In response, the wife counterclaimed and asserted that her guarantee was unenforceable because it was obtained in violation of the ECOA. The Seventh Circuit ultimately found the wife’s counterclaim failed because she could not prove discrimination on the basis of sex or marital status. However, before reaching that conclusion, the Seventh Circuit expressed concerns about the legitimacy of a guarantor’s ECOA claim stemming from an alleged Reg. B violation. In assessing the validity of such a claim, the Seventh Circuit noted, “At first blush, the [ECOA] has no relevance to this case” because the wife “was not an applicant for credit, and neither received credit nor was denied it.” The Seventh Circuit explained that the ECOA was intended to forbid creditors from “deny[ing] credit to a woman on the basis of a belief that she would not be a good credit risk because she would be distracted by child care or some other stereotypically female responsibility.” The Seventh Circuit reasoned that:

The Federal Reserve Board, however, has defined “applicant” for credit (the term in the statute) to include a guarantor. We doubt that the statute can be stretched far enough to allow this interpretation. It is true that courts defer to administrative interpretations of statutes when a statute is ambiguous, and that this precept applies to the Federal Reserve Board’s interpretation of ambiguous provisions of the Equal Credit Opportunity Act. But there is nothing

90. Id. (emphasis added).
92. Id.
93. Id. at 437.
94. Id. The district court granted summary judgment in favor of the creditor, Moran, but the jury found in favor of the wife on her counterclaim. Id.
95. Id. at 442.
96. Moran Foods, 476 F.3d at 441.
97. Id.
98. Id.
ambiguous about “applicant” and no way to confuse an applicant with a guarantor. What is more, to interpret “applicant” as embracing “guarantor” opens vistas of liability that the Congress that enacted the Act would have been unlikely to accept.99

Two years after the Seventh Circuit questioned the validity of Reg. B’s definition of “applicant,” the Federal District Court for the Eastern District of Missouri, a lower court within the United States Court of Appeals for the Eighth Circuit, decided Champion Bank v. Regional Development, LLC and became the first court to explicitly hold that the ECOA does not apply to spousal guarantees.100 The factual scenario presented in Champion Bank was identical to Moran Foods and Frontenac Bank.101 Relying on the reasoning articulated by the Seventh Circuit, the Champion Bank court explained that a “guarantor is not an applicant because a guarantor does not, by definition, apply for anything.”102 The court reasoned that extending the protections of the ECOA to spousal guarantees is unreasonable because it “expands the ECOA beyond its intended purpose and leads to circular and illogical results.”103 The court further reasoned that Reg. B’s definition of “applicant” “leads to circular and illogical results” because it is difficult to conceive how a guarantor can claim to have been discriminated against because “a guarantor cannot be denied credit for which he or she did not apply.”104 Finally, the court explained that extending the ECOA’s protections to a guarantor “leads to circular and illogical results” because it allows a guarantor to claim rights under the ECOA while simultaneously allowing a guarantor to assert that she should not be a member of the class of people the ECOA is designed to protect.105

Thereafter, in January 2013, the Federal District Court for the Western District of Missouri, also a lower court within the Eighth Circuit, decided Arvest Bank v. Uppalapati and explicitly declined to follow Frontenac Bank.106 Instead, the Arvest Bank court adopted the reasoning articulated by the Seventh Circuit and the Federal District Court for the Eastern District of Missouri, and held that guarantors do not have authority to sue under the ECOA.107 In its analysis, the Arvest Bank court explained that when a court

99. Id. (internal citations omitted).
103. Id. at *3.
104. Id. at *2–3.
105. Id. at *3.
107. Id.
assesses the validity of an administrative regulation, the court must (1) determine whether the intent of Congress is clear and, if it is not, (2) determine whether the contested regulation is based on a permissible construction of the statute.\(^{108}\) After determining the Eighth Circuit had not addressed the validity of Reg. B, the Arvest Bank court looked to the rationale provided in Moran Foods and Champion Bank, and concluded that the Board exceeded its authority because (1) there was nothing ambiguous about the ECOA’s definition of “applicant” and (2) interpreting “applicant” to include guarantors was an impermissible expansion of the ECOA.\(^{109}\) Shortly after the Arvest Bank decision, the Federal District Court for the Western District of Missouri reaffirmed its position in Smithville 169 v. Citizens Bank & Trust Co. and again held that the ECOA does not extend to spousal guarantees.\(^{110}\)

Despite the decisions by the Seventh Circuit and the federal district courts in Missouri that rejected the validity of Reg. B, federal courts in other jurisdictions determined that Reg. B was valid\(^{111}\) and deferred to the Board’s expanded definition of “applicant.”\(^{112}\) For example, in LOL Finance Co. v. F.J. Faison, Jr. Revocable Trust, the Federal District Court for the District of Minnesota, another lower federal court within the Eighth Circuit, explicitly declined to follow Moran Foods and Champion Bank.\(^{113}\) Without providing any analysis, the court simply explained that it was “wary of categorically discounting the Federal Reserve Board’s Regulations.”\(^{114}\) Likewise, in Citgo Petroleum Corp. v. Bulk Petroleum Corp., the Federal District Court for the Northern District of Oklahoma, a lower federal court within the Tenth Circuit,


\(^{109}\) Arvest Bank, 2013 WL 85336, at *3–4. Before deciding to follow Moran Foods and Champion Bank, the court reviewed several cases, including Frontenac Bank, which explicitly rejected Moran Foods and Champion Bank. Id. at *4; see, e.g., Citgo Petroleum Corp. v. Bulk Petroleum Corp., No. 08-CV-654-TCK-PJC, 2010 WL 3931496, at *9 (N.D. Okla. Oct. 5, 2010) (“This Court declines to follow Moran and adher[ing] to Regulation B” because “[t]he court’s holding in Moran eliminates entire aspects of the Federal Reserve Board’s implementation scheme” that “consumers have come to rely on” and that “creditors have been trained to follow.”).


\(^{113}\) LOL Fin., 2010 WL 3118630, at *7.

\(^{114}\) Id.
“decline[d] to follow Moran [Foods] and adhere[d] to Regulation B . . . .”115 In doing so, the Citgo Petroleum court concluded that “guarantors who are required to sign a guaranty in connection with an extension of credit covered by the ECOA will continue to receive protection.”116 The court also justified its decision not to follow Moran Foods by explaining that Moran Foods “eliminates entire aspects of the Federal Reserve Board’s implementation scheme” that “[c]onsumers have come to rely upon” and that “creditors have been trained to follow.”117 The court concluded its analysis by stating that “[u]nless and until the Tenth Circuit mandates that the Federal Reserve Board’s definitions and implementation scheme indeed run afoul of congressional intent, this Court adheres to Regulation B, Silverman, and other similar cases extending the ECOA’s protections to guarantors.”118

C. The Circuit Split

In 2014, the Sixth and Eighth Circuits became the first Federal Courts of Appeals to explicitly address the issue of whether the Board exceeded the regulatory authority granted to it under the ECOA when it changed the ECOA’s definition of “applicant” to include guarantors. The courts ultimately reached different conclusions, thereby creating a circuit split and setting the stage for the Supreme Court of the United States to resolve the issue.

1. The Sixth Circuit Upholds the Validity of Regulation B

First, in June 2014, the Sixth Circuit decided RL BB Acquisition, LLC v. Bridgemill Commons Development Group, LLC. In Bridgemill, the Sixth Circuit was presented with the same factual scenario that was presented in Frontenac Bank: a wife guaranteed her husband’s debt so that his business could obtain credit, and, after the business defaulted on its loans and the creditor sought to enforce the wife’s personal guarantee, the wife asserted that her guarantee was unenforceable because it was obtained in violation of the ECOA.119 To resolve the case, the court had to conduct a Chevron analysis to determine the validity of the Board’s amended definition of “applicant.”

First, the court explained that the proper inquiry under step one of Chevron is “whether [the] ECOA’s definition of ‘applicant’ unambiguously excludes

116. Id.
117. Id.
guarantors, or whether the [ECOA] is ambiguous on this issue.” In conducting step one, the court focused on what it referred to as “two broad terms” in the ECOA’s definition of “applicant”—“applies” and “credit.”\footnote{120} First, the court defined “applies” to mean “to make an appeal or a request esp. formally and often in writing and usu. for something to benefit oneself,” or “[t]o make an approach to (a person) for information or aid; to have recourse or make application to, to appeal to; to make a (formal) request for.”\footnote{121} The court reasoned that although “[a] guarantor does not traditionally approach a creditor herself asking for credit[,] . . . a guarantor does formally approach a creditor in the sense that the guarantor offers up her own personal liability to the creditor if the borrower defaults.”\footnote{122} According to the court, although the ECOA could permissibly be read to mean that only the initial applicant can be deemed to “apply” for credit, “the text could just as easily encompass all those who offer promises in support of an application—including guarantors, who make formal requests for aid in the form of credit for a third party.”\footnote{123} Second, the court honed in on the term “credit” and noted that the ECOA defines “credit” as “the right granted by a creditor to a debtor to defer payment of debt . . . .”\footnote{124} The court reasoned that this definition demonstrated that “an ‘applicant’ requests credit, but a ‘debtor’ reaps the benefit.”\footnote{125} According to the court, “[t]he use of these two different terms suggests that the applicant and the debtor are not always the same person[,] . . . [and therefore] . . . it would be reasonable to conclude that the applicant could be a third party, such as a guarantor.”\footnote{126} Accordingly, the court concluded “that the statutory definition [of ‘applicant’] is ambiguous because it could be read to include third parties who do not initiate an application for credit, and who do not seek credit for themselves—a category that includes guarantors.”\footnote{127}

The court then moved on to step two of Chevron and noted that “[i]ts task at Chevron step two [was] to determine whether [Reg. B] stems from a permissible construction of the [ECOA].”\footnote{128} Ultimately, the court found that “[s]ince ‘at least one of the natural meanings’ of applicant includes guarantors, we conclude that ‘the agency’s interpretation [ ] represents a permissible one entitled to deference.’”\footnote{129} The court supported its conclusion by explaining that

\begin{itemize}
  \item \footnote{120} Id. at 385; see also 15 U.S.C. § 1691a(b) (2012).
  \item \footnote{121} Bridgemill, 754 F.3d at 385 (internal citations omitted) (emphasis in original).
  \item \footnote{122} Id.
  \item \footnote{123} Id.
  \item \footnote{124} Id.
  \item \footnote{125} Id.
  \item \footnote{126} Bridgemill, 754 F.3d at 385.
  \item \footnote{127} Id. at 384–85.
  \item \footnote{128} Id. at 385.
  \item \footnote{129} Id. (quoting Harris v. Olszewski, 442 F.3d 456, 467 (6th Cir. 2006)).
\end{itemize}
the Board acted with caution in amending Reg. B’s definition of “applicant.”130 The court also dismissed the Moran Foods court’s rationale and explained:

[W]e are not troubled by the prospect of guarantors being made whole after a creditor violates the [ECOA] . . . [because] [a] creditor will only lose its entire debt if the borrower immediately defaults and the pledged collateral turns out to be worthless [and, therefore,] [w]e will not strike down a valid regulation to salvage bad underwriting.131

The court further supported its decision by emphasizing that “[the] ECOA has undergone several amendments since the Federal Reserve included guarantors within the definition of ‘applicant’—including an extensive amendment to the statute after Moran [Foods] was decided—and none has clarified that the term ‘applicant’ cannot include guarantors.”132 Therefore, the court held that “[Reg.] B’s definition of ‘applicant’ constitutes a valid construction of the statutory definition of that term[,] [and] [a] guarantor may therefore seek relief for violations of the spouse-guarantor rule.”133

2. The Eighth Circuit Rejects Bridgemill and Holds Regulation B Invalid

Shortly after Bridgemill, in August 2014, the Eighth Circuit decided Hawkins v. Community Bank of Raymore.134 The factual scenario in Hawkins was identical to Bridgemill.135 Thus, like Bridgemill, the court conducted a Chevron analysis.136 Ultimately, the court rejected the Bridgemill decision and resolved the case under step one of Chevron by holding that “the text of the ECOA clearly provides that a person does not qualify as an applicant under the statute solely by virtue of executing a guaranty to secure the debt of another.”137

Like the Bridgemill court, the Hawkins court’s analysis under Chevron step one focused on the ECOA’s definition of “applicant” and its use of the term “appl[y].”138 Essentially, the Hawkins court agreed with the Bridgemill court that “apply” means “to make an appeal or request esp[ecially] formally and often in writing and usu[ally] for something of benefit to oneself.”139 However, the Hawkins court reasoned:

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130. Id. at 386.
131. Bridgemill, 754 F.3d at 386.
132. Id.
133. Id.
135. Id.
136. Id. at 940.
137. Id. at 941.
138. Id.
139. Hawkins, 761 F.3d at 941 (internal quotes omitted).
The plain language of the ECOA unmistakably provides that a person is an applicant only if she requests credit. But a person does not, by executing a guaranty, request credit. A “guaranty” ... [is] a promise to answer for another person’s debt, default, or failure to perform. More specifically, a guaranty is an undertaking by a guarantor to answer for payment of some debt, or performance of some contract, of another person in the event of default. A guaranty is collateral and secondary to the underlying loan transaction between the lender and the borrower. While a guarantor no doubt desires for a lender to extend credit to a borrower, it does not follow from the execution of a guaranty that a guarantor has requested credit or otherwise been involved in applying for credit. Thus, a guarantor does not request credit and therefore cannot qualify as an applicant under the unambiguous text of the ECOA.140

The court then acknowledged that the Sixth Circuit had reached a contrary conclusion in Bridgemill.141 The court explained that it agreed with the Sixth Circuit that a guarantor does not approach a creditor herself for credit and that a guarantor is a third party to the larger application process.142 But, contrary to the Sixth Circuit, the court explained:

[T]his ends the inquiry [for us] because it demonstrates that a guarantor unambiguously does not request credit. “Where Congress has manifested its intention, we may not manufacture ambiguity in order to defeat that intent” ... We find it to be unambiguous that assuming a secondary, contingent liability does not amount to a request for credit. A guarantor engages in different conduct, receives different benefits, and exposes herself to different legal consequences than does a credit applicant. “[T]here is nothing ambiguous about ‘applicant’ and no way to confuse an applicant with a guarantor.”143

To conclude, the court emphasized that its interpretation of the ECOA “comport[ed] with the purposes and policies underlying the ECOA.”144 The court noted that the ECOA’s focus was to ensure “fair access to credit by preventing lenders from excluding borrowers from the credit market based on the borrowers’ marital status.”145 The court then explained that this concern is not raised by the execution of a spousal guaranty because, “[b]y requesting ... a guaranty, a lender does not thereby exclude the guarantor from the lending process or deny the guarantor access to credit.”146

140. Id. (emphasis added).
141. Id.
142. Id.
143. Id. at 941–42 (internal citations omitted).
144. Hawkins, 761 F.3d at 942.
145. Id.
146. Id. Judge Colloton wrote a concurring opinion that provides additional analysis to support Judge Gruender’s majority opinion. Id. at 943. The concurrence noted that the ordinary meaning of an “applicant” is one who requests something for her own benefit, not for the benefit
3. The Supreme Court Grants Writ of Certiorari for Hawkins

After Hawkins created a circuit split on the issue of whether the Board exceeded the regulatory authority granted to it under the ECOA when it changed the ECOA’s definition of “applicant” to include guarantors, the Supreme Court of the United States granted certiorari on March 2, 2015 and heard oral arguments in October 2015.147

III. THE ECOA’S LEGISLATIVE HISTORY

While the ECOA, as finally enacted, only prevented creditors from discriminating against “applicants”—those who “appl[y] to a creditor directly for an extension, renewal, or continuation of credit, or appl[y] to a creditor indirectly by use of an existing credit plan for an amount exceeding a previously established credit limit”—earlier proposals of the ECOA were more expansive and sought to prevent creditors from discriminating against more than just “applicants.”148

For example, on May 23, 1972, the House of Representatives proposed a bill that sought to make it “unlawful for any creditor to discriminate against any person in any extension of credit or in connection with any application for credit on the basis of sex or marital status.”149 In that bill, “application for credit” was broadly defined as “any communication, either oral, written, or otherwise, by a person to a creditor requesting an extension of credit to that person or any other person.”150 Between 1972 and 1974, the House and Senate continuously proposed new versions of the ECOA, with some proposals seeking to narrow the ECOA’s scope and other proposals seeking to expand its scope. In a bill introduced on January 3, 1973, the House proposed to narrow the scope of the ECOA by making it “unlawful for any creditor to discriminate on the basis of sex or marital status against any consumer in connection with the approval or denial of any extension of credit.”151 In contrast, in a

150. Id. (emphasis added).
151. H.R. 247, 93d Cong. (1st Sess. Jan. 3, 1973) (emphasis added); see also S. 867, 93d Cong. (1st Sess. Feb. 15, 1973) (proposing to prevent creditors from discriminating against “any person on the basis of sex or marital status in connection with the approval or denial of any
subsequent bill introduced on May 29, 1973, the House expanded the scope of the ECOA further than it had in earlier proposals and sought to make it “unlawful for any creditor, card issuer, or other person to discriminate against any person on account of sex or marital status in connection with the approval or denial of any extension of credit, or with respect to the issuance, renewal, denial, or terms of any credit card.”

Despite Congress’s initial inability to agree on the scope of the ECOA, the House and Senate reached agreement in May 1974. On May 9, 1974, the House introduced a bill that proposed to make it “unlawful for any creditor to discriminate against any applicant on the basis of sex or marital status with respect to any aspect of a credit transaction.” Five days later on May 14, 1974, the Senate introduced a bill that adopted the House’s ECOA provisions. Then, on October 28, 1974, Congress enacted the final version of the ECOA, which included the ECOA provisions agreed to in May 1974. Although amendments that have subsequently been proposed have sought to expand the ECOA’s scope, the scope has remained unchanged and has continued to protect only “applicants” from discrimination on the basis of sex or marital status.

As new versions of the ECOA were proposed from 1972 to 1974, reports issued by Congress shed light on the scenarios that the ECOA was intended to prevent. In a report from June 1973, the Senate identified discriminatory acts taken by creditors against women that “established a clear pattern of discrimination across the country and on an institutionalized level” and demonstrated a need for legislation. These acts included:

1. Single women having more trouble obtaining credit . . . than single men;
2. Creditors generally requiring a woman who has credit to reapply for credit when she marries, usually in her husband’s name . . .; (3) Creditors being unwilling to extend credit to a married woman in her own name; (4) Women who are divorced or widowed having trouble reestablishing credit . . .; and (5) Creditors being unwilling to count a wife’s income when a married couple applies for credit.

The report then listed “examples of practices that constituted discrimination on the basis of sex or marital status if applied to an applicant who [was] extension of credit”) (emphasis added). The House introduced a provision exactly identical to the Senate on February 27, 1973. See H.R. 4734, 93d Cong. (1st Sess. Feb. 27, 1973).

156. See H.R. 14720, 93d Cong. (2d Sess. May 9, 1974).
158. Id.
otherwise creditworthy.”159 Some of those examples included: (1) “[r]equiring a newly married woman whose creditworthiness has otherwise remained the same to reapply for credit as a new applicant,” (2) “[r]efusing to extend credit to a married woman in her own name, even though she would be deemed creditworthy if unmarried,” (3) “[r]efusing to count a wife’s income when a married couple applies for credit,” (4) “[r]efusing to extend credit to a newly separated or divorced woman solely because of her change in marital status;” and (5) “[a]pplying stricter standards in the case of married applicants where the wife rather than the husband is the primary family supporter.”160 The report also included a particular example about “a woman in her forties who as head of her household wanted to buy a house for herself and her children and could not get a mortgage without the signature of her 70 year old father.”161 As the report put it, this demonstrated just another instance where a single woman was “flatly informed that mortgage loans were not granted to single persons without cosigners.”162

Remarks by congressmen also shed light on the purpose of the ECOA. For example, in May 1974, Congressman Bingham identified specific instances of discrimination that women had encountered and provided the following example:

An unmarried Minneapolis woman in her early 30’s applied to a bank for a loan to purchase a summer home. She had enough cash to make a substantial down payment and was steadily employed, but her loan application was turned down. Yet her fiancé, who had gone through bankruptcy, had no trouble in securing a loan to purchase the very same property with a smaller down payment.163

Bingham further explained that women were “the victims of the illogical view . . . that women are of marginal economic value.”164 In accordance with Bingham’s comments, Congressman Brock remarked that “[c]reditworthy women are excluded from transactions because of convention[al] and medieval ideas of those who believe women are not as financially reliable as are men.”165 To support his position, Brock stated, “Too many credit companies do not mind if women pay the bills,” and that “[t]hey object only if the woman applies for the credit rating herself.”166 Brock then provided the following example:

159. Id.
160. Id. at 17.
161. Id.
164. Id.
166. Id. (emphasis added).
One married couple applied for a charge card at a department store. The wife was earning $6,000 and the husband, being a student, earned only $2,700 a year. When they applied for the charge, they stated correctly on the application that the wife was their main source of income. They were refused the charge account, told that company policy prohibited the granting of credit either in a woman’s name or to couples where the wife carried the main financial responsibility. Thus, although together they earned $8,700, because the wife earned most of it, they were considered credit risks. This same couple at the same time applied for another charge card—this time at another store and in the husband’s name only—and received a charge card shortly thereafter.167

Similar to Bingham and Brock’s views that Congress needed to protect female credit applicants, Congressman Sullivan stated, “Our objective is to require creditors . . . to make their decisions on the granting or withholding of credit on the basis of the individual applicant’s creditworthiness . . . .”168

IV. TESTING THE VALIDITY OF REGULATION B

A. The Frontenac Bank Court Misinterpreted Boone

The Frontenac Bank court’s rejection of the Seventh Circuit’s reasoning in Moran Foods was based primarily on its misinterpretation of the Missouri Supreme Court’s decision in Boone.169 The Frontenac Bank court construed Boone as holding that “the ECOA could be asserted as an affirmative defense by a wife in a creditor’s claim to enforce a guaranty.”170 Based on its determination that guarantors were protected by the ECOA under Boone, the Frontenac Bank court mistakenly assumed that the Boone court had addressed the issue of whether Reg. B’s expanded definition of “applicant” was a valid exercise of the Board’s regulatory authority.171 However, according to the author of the Boone opinion, the Honorable Michael A. Wolff,172 the validity of Reg. B’s definition of “applicant” was never raised as an issue at the summary judgment hearing in the trial court or on appeal before the Boone court.173 Rather, the issue before the Boone court was whether alleged ECOA violations could be asserted as a counterclaim or affirmative defense after the

167. Id.
170. Id.
171. Id.
173. Id.
statute of limitations had run. Consequently, the Boone court was prohibited from addressing the validity of Reg. B’s definition of “applicant,” either on its own motion or on a motion by the parties. Thus, the Boone court was obligated to apply Reg. B.

Had the Frontenac Bank court correctly construed Boone, the Frontenac Bank court would have understood that it had the authority to invalidate Reg. B’s definition of “applicant” since the United States Supreme Court had not addressed the issue. Under Missouri law, courts of Missouri “are bound to follow only [the United States] Supreme Court’s decisions interpreting the federal Constitution and federal statutes.” In the absence of any controlling authority from either the United States Supreme Court or the Missouri Supreme Court, the Frontenac Bank court should have “look[ed] respectfully to [lower federal court] opinions for such aid and guidance as may be found therein.” Instead, the Frontenac Bank court quickly dismissed Frontenac’s contention that the court should follow Moran Foods and the other lower federal court cases that invalidated Reg. B’s definition of “applicant” without providing a thoughtful analysis.

Instead of relying solely on Boone, the Frontenac Bank court should have conducted a Chevron analysis. The United States Supreme Court has explained that the Chevron doctrine applies “when it appears that Congress delegated authority to the agency generally to make rules carrying the force of law, and that the agency interpretation claiming deference was promulgated in the exercise of that authority.” In regards to determining the validity of Reg. B’s definition of “applicant,” the Chevron doctrine applies (1) because the ECOA explicitly delegates authority to the Board to make rules carrying the force of law since the ECOA provides that the Board “shall prescribe regulations to

174. Id.
175. Id.; see Miller v. Pool & Canfield, Inc., 800 S.W.2d 120, 124 (Mo. Ct. App. 1990) (refusing to consider issues not raised during summary judgment hearing because an appellate court may not address issues not raised at trial) (citing Lincoln Credit Co. v. Peach, 636 S.W.2d 31, 36 (Mo. 1982) (en banc)).
176. Interview with Michael A. Wolff, supra note 172. State courts are obligated to apply federal laws, including administrative regulations, pursuant to the Supremacy Clause. See U.S. Const. art. VI, cl. 2.
177. Interview with Michael A. Wolff, supra note 172.
178. Wimberly v. Labor & Indus. Relations Comm’n of Missouri, 688 S.W.2d 344, 347–49 (Mo. 1985) (en banc) (deferring “to the interpretation rendered by the agency Congress entrusted with administration of the statute”).
179. Id. at 347.
181. See United States v. Mead Corp., 533 U.S. 218, 226–27 (2001) (“Delegation of such authority may be shown in a variety of ways, as by an agency’s power to engage in adjudication or notice-and-comment rulemaking, or by some other indication of a comparable congressional intent.”).
carry out the purposes of [the ECOA]" and (2) because Reg. B was promulgated by the Board in the exercise of the regulatory authority granted to it under the ECOA.183

B. Chevron Analysis

Under the test articulated by the United States Supreme Court in Chevron:

When a court reviews an agency’s construction of the statute which it administers, it is confronted with two questions. First, always, is the question whether Congress has directly spoken to the precise question at issue. If the intent of Congress is clear, that is the end of the matter; for the court, as well as the agency, must give effect to the unambiguously expressed intent of Congress. If, however, the court determines Congress has not directly addressed the precise question at issue, the court does not simply impose its own construction on the statute, as would be necessary in the absence of an administrative interpretation. Rather, if the statute is silent or ambiguous with respect to the specific issue, the question for the court is whether the agency’s answer is based on a permissible construction of the statute.184

Thus, the Frontenac Bank court should have conducted a Chevron analysis to determine (1) whether the ECOA is clear and unambiguous and, if it is not, (2) whether the Board’s interpretation of the ECOA is reasonable.185

1. Step 1: Is the ECOA Clear and Unambiguous?

The first step of the Chevron analysis would have required the Frontenac Bank court to determine whether Congress has directly spoken to the precise issue of whether a guarantor is an “applicant.”186 To make this determination, courts are expected to employ “traditional tools of statutory construction,” including the statute’s literal language, legislative history, and purpose.187 Based on the ECOA’s language, history, and purpose, the Frontenac Bank court should have concluded that Congress clearly and unambiguously expressed that a guarantor does not qualify as an “applicant.”

183. 12 C.F.R. § 202.1(a) (2013) (“This regulation is issued by the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System pursuant to title VII (Equal Credit Opportunity Act) of the Consumer Credit Protection Act . . . .”).
185. Id.
186. Id.
187. Id. at 843 n. 9; see Zuni Pub. Sch. Dist. No. 89 v. Dep’t of Educ., 550 U.S. 81, 90–95 (2007) (looking to the technicability of the matter, the history and purpose of the statute, and the language); INS v. Cardoza-Fonseca. 480 U.S. 421, 446 (1987) (looking to the plain language of the Act and the Act’s legislative history).
a. The Language of the ECOA

The plain language of the statute is the most important consideration in determining whether Congress clearly and unambiguously indicated the scope of the ECOA’s protections because, if the intent of Congress is clearly and unambiguously expressed by the statutory language at issue, that is the end of the analysis.188

The plain language of the ECOA only protects an “applicant” (“any person who applies to a creditor directly for extension, renewal, or continuation of credit, or applies to a creditor indirectly by use of an existing credit plan for an amount exceeding a previously established credit limit”) from discrimination on the basis of sex or marital status.189 While the ECOA’s definition of “applicant” is specific to credit applicants, the ECOA’s definition is consistent with general dictionary definitions of “applicant” in that they all require an individual to personally or formally “request” something.190 In contrast, the general dictionary definitions for “guarantor,” a term which is not defined (or even mentioned for that matter) in the ECOA, is someone who “gives security for a debt.”191 Based on the significant differences in the definitions of “applicant” and “guarantor,” it is clear and unambiguous that a guarantor does not qualify as an “applicant” under the ECOA because a guarantor does not ask for anything but merely promises to assume liability for a loan that an “applicant”—i.e. a borrower—requests. Therefore, “[when] taken with absolute literalness,”192 the ECOA’s definition of “applicant” does not include guarantors because “a guarantor does not, by definition, apply for anything.”193 Indeed, because guarantors like Ms. Hughes in Frontenac Bank base their ECOA claims on allegations that the creditor improperly required their guarantee, they are admittedly conceding that they did not apply for or request anything. Thus, it is hard to imagine how a guarantor can be considered an

188. *Chevron*, 467 U.S. at 842–43.
190. See *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* 105 (3d ed. 1993) (defining an “applicant” as “one who applies for something” or “makes a usu. formal request . . . for something of benefit to himself”); *Black’s Law Dictionary* 115 (9th ed. 2009) (defining an “applicant” as “[o]ne who requests something”).
191. See *Webster’s New International Dictionary*, supra note 190, at 1007 (defining a “guarantor” as “one that makes or gives a guaranty or surety,” and defining “guaranty” as “an undertaking to answer for the payment of some debt or the performance of some duty of another in case of the failure of such other to pay or perform”); *Black’s Law Dictionary* 833 (4th ed. 1996) (defining “guarantor” as “[one] who makes a guaranty”).
“applicant” for purposes of the ECOA since a guarantor suing under the ECOA alleges that she did not apply or request to be a guarantor.

b. The Legislative History and Purpose of the ECOA

The legislative history of the ECOA cuts strongly in favor of finding that Congress did not intend the protections of the ECOA to extend to guarantors. Initial proposals of the ECOA contained language that indicated the ECOA might extend to guarantors. Specifically, a bill proposed by the House in June 1972 sought to make it unlawful for creditors to discriminate against “any person” in connection with “any application for credit.”194 Importantly, “application for credit” was defined as “any communication, either oral, written, or otherwise, by a person to a creditor requesting an extension of credit to that person or any other person.”195 Because the proposal sought to protect a person who requested credit for any other person, one could reasonably argue that the proposal sought to protect guarantors, as well as applicants, from credit discrimination on the basis of sex or marital status. However, by the time the ECOA was officially enacted in October 1974, the language used by Congress significantly narrowed the scope of the ECOA to protect only “applicants”—or those who actually applied for credit themselves.196

Additionally, one particular scenario of discrimination identified by Congress prior to the enactment of the ECOA demonstrates that the ECOA was not intended to protect guarantors. In a report from June 1973, the Senate provided an example of a situation that it hoped to prevent by enacting the ECOA.197 That example involved “a woman in her forties who as head of her household wanted to buy a house for herself and her children but could not get a mortgage without the signature of her 70 year old father.”198 In the words of the Senate, this demonstrated just another instance where a single woman was “flatly informed that mortgage loans were not granted to single persons without cosigners.”199 Tellingly, while the Senate deemed this as an unacceptable example of discrimination against a female credit applicant, the Senate never once indicated that the woman’s father was being discriminated against as a result of his being required to co-sign for, or guarantee, his daughter’s loan.200

Furthermore, remarks made by various congressmen clearly demonstrate that the primary purpose of the ECOA was to require creditors to willingly

195. Id. (emphasis added).
198. Id. at 17.
199. Id.
200. Id. at 17–18.
include, rather than exclude, women from credit transactions. For instance, Congressman Brock’s remark that “[c]reditworthy women are excluded from transactions because of convention[al] and medieval ideas of those who believe women are not as financially reliable as are men” supports the inference that women were not only deemed to be unworthy credit applicants but also that they were deemed to be unworthy credit guarantors. From this remark, it can further be inferred that one of the purposes of the ECOA was to increase the involvement of women in credit transactions not only as applicants but also as guarantors for their husbands. Prior to the enactment of the ECOA, it would have been nearly unheard of for a creditor to extend credit to a male applicant based on his wife’s willingness to guarantee the loan because creditors were reluctant to involve women in any aspect of a credit transaction. Thus, while the Congress that enacted the ECOA sought to encourage creditors to allow wives to be guarantors, the Board’s current version of Reg. B is doing the exact opposite and is discouraging creditors from considering wives as potential guarantors for their husbands’ loans because of the possibility that the wife will later allege her guarantee was obtained in violation of the ECOA.

Therefore, based on the ECOA’s plain language, legislative history, and purpose, it is evident that Congress clearly and unambiguously expressed that a guarantor does not qualify as an “applicant” under the ECOA. Thus, had the Frontenac Bank court conducted a Chevron analysis, it should have concluded that Reg. B failed the first step because “there is nothing ambiguous about ‘applicant’ and no way to confuse an applicant with a guarantor.”

2. Step 2: Is the Board’s Interpretation of the ECOA Reasonable?

Assuming arguendo that Frontenac Bank court found the ECOA’s definition of “applicant” was not clear and unambiguous, the second step of the Chevron analysis would have required the court to determine whether the Board’s interpretation of the ECOA was reasonable. As was explained by the District Court for the Eastern District of Missouri in Champion Bank, the Board’s interpretation of the ECOA and the term “applicant” is unreasonable because “it leads to circular and illogical results.”

Specifically, the Board’s expansive definition of the term “applicant” is unreasonable because, by including guarantors in its definition of “applicant,” Reg. B allows a guarantor to claim rights under the ECOA while

202. Id.
simultaneously allowing a guarantor to assert that she should not be a member of the class of people the ECOA is designed to protect. In addition to leading to circular and illogical results, the Board’s amendment to the definition of “applicant” is unreasonable because it was not based on the Board’s determination that such an amendment would further the purposes of the ECOA. Rather, it was based on the Board’s determination that such an expansion would not impose any new burdens on creditors. Certainly, such a reason does not justify the Board’s decision to impermissibly expand the protections of the ECOA. Indeed, the Board seemingly acknowledged that it was changing, rather than interpreting, the ECOA when it amended Reg. B’s definition of “applicant” to include guarantors by stating:

The existing regulation prohibits creditors, in certain situations, from requiring an applicant to obtain a guarantor . . . [but] [if] a creditor violates this provision . . . a guarantor whose signature has been illegally required currently has no legal remedy because . . . the [ECOA] confers standing to sue only upon an “aggrieved applicant.”

As the analysis above demonstrates, Reg. B’s expansion of the term “applicant” to include guarantors flouts common sense and is an unreasonable interpretation of the ECOA. Consequently, Reg. B fails under the second step of the Chevron analysis as well.

C. Practical Effects and Consequences of Frontenac Bank

Although the validity of Reg. B will soon be resolved by the United States Supreme Court, the Missouri Court of Appeals for the Eastern District’s improper interpretation of the ECOA and Reg. B in Frontenac Bank has had a negative effect on local creditors since 2012. As a result of Frontenac Bank, between 2012 and 2015, state and federal courts in Missouri interpreted the ECOA and Reg. B differently. Thus, a creditor’s ability to enforce a spousal guaranty depended solely on whether the creditor’s claim was heard in state or federal court. This was detrimental to local creditors because, oftentimes,
their only recourse was to sue in state court, where it was unlikely a spousal guaranty would be held enforceable. Meanwhile, national creditors doing business in Missouri could pursue their claims in federal court, where it was likely a spousal guarantee would be held enforceable. Therefore, local and national creditors who required spousal guarantees under similar circumstances achieved different results based simply on the forum in which their claims were heard. Additionally, the practical consequences of the Missouri Court of Appeals for the Eastern District’s decision in *Frontenac Bank* were frequently observed by a prominent local attorney, Joseph J. Trad.212 One of Mr. Trad’s client’s creditors reacted to the *Frontenac Bank* case by informing the client that his spouse’s guarantee would no longer be required.213 According to Mr. Trad, the creditor’s decision to no longer require the client’s wife’s guarantee likely indicated that creditors were unsure of whether or not they were in compliance with Reg. B’s spousal signature provisions and, as a result, were reluctant to assume the added business risk entailed in obtaining spousal guarantees.214 Consequently, it is likely that *Frontenac Bank* prevented commercial enterprises which were not creditworthy from being able to obtain financing that would have been available prior to the Missouri Court of Appeals for the Eastern District’s decision *Frontenac Bank*.215

**CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the Missouri Court of Appeals for the Eastern District wrongly decided *Frontenac Bank* and should not have upheld the validity of Reg. B’s expanded definition of “applicant.” Specifically, the *Frontenac Bank* court erred by misinterpreting the Missouri Supreme Court’s decision in *Boone* and by failing to conduct a *Chevron* analysis to determine the validity of Reg. B. Had the *Frontenac Bank* court correctly interpreted *Boone* and conducted a *Chevron* analysis, the court would have concluded that Reg. B’s definition of “applicant” is invalid (1) because Congress clearly and unambiguously expressed that a guarantor does not qualify as an “applicant,” and (2) because

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213. Telephone Interview with Joseph J. Trad, supra note 212.

214. *Id.*

215. *Id.*
the Board’s interpretation of the ECOA and the term “applicant” is unreasonable and “leads to circular and illogical results.”

Under the first prong of *Chevron*, Reg. B fails because the term “applicant” is unambiguously limited to a person who applies for or requests credit—i.e. a borrower—and does not include a person who simply gives security for a borrower’s debt—i.e. a guarantor. Indeed, because guarantors base their ECOA claims on allegations that the creditor improperly *required* their guarantee, they are admittedly conceding that they are not applicants because they did not apply for or request anything. Under the second prong of *Chevron*, Reg. B fails because it unreasonably impedes the purpose of the ECOA, which is to encourage creditors to include, rather than exclude, women (especially wives) from credit transactions. Instead, Reg. B discourages creditors from considering a wife’s creditworthiness when extending credit to the wife’s husband because of the potential risk that the wife’s guarantee will be deemed void and unenforceable. Reg. B’s definition of “applicant” also leads to circular and illogical results because it allows a guarantor-wife to assert that she should not be a member of the class of people Reg. B is designed to protect—i.e. guarantors—and simultaneously allows the wife to claim rights under the ECOA as a guarantor.

Based on the analysis provided by many federal courts and the analysis provided by this Note, the Supreme Court of the United States should hold Reg. B’s definition of “applicant” to be invalid.216

JUSTIN LADENDORF*

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