1	IN THE SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES
2	x
3	ALABAMA DEPARTMENT OF :
4	REVENUE, ET AL., :
5	Petitioners : No. 13-553
6	v. :
7	CSX TRANSPORTATION, INC. :
8	x
9	Washington, D.C.
10	Tuesday, December 9, 2014
11	
12	The above-entitled matter came on for oral
13	argument before the Supreme Court of the United States
14	at 11:13 a.m.
15	APPEARANCES:
16	ANDREW L. BRASHER, ESQ., solicitor General, Montgomery,
17	Ala.; on behalf of Petitioners.
18	ELAINE J. GOLDENBERG, ESQ., Assistant to the Solicitor
19	General, Department of Justice, Washington, D.C.; for
20	United States, as amicus curiae, supporting neither
21	party.
22	CARTER G. PHILLIPS, ESQ., Washington, D.C.; on behalf of
23	Respondent.
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1 PROCEEDINGS
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- 2 (11:13 a.m.)
- 3 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: We'll hear argument
- 4 next in Case No. 13-553, the Alabama Department of
- 5 Revenue v. CSX Transportation.
- 6 General Brasher.
- 7 ORAL ARGUMENT OF ANDREW L. BRASHER
- 8 ON BEHALF OF THE PETITIONERS
- 9 MR. BRASHER: Thank you, Mr. Chief Justice,
- 10 and may it please the Court:
- 11 The 4-R Act does not make railroads the most
- 12 favored taxpayers. It instead balances the needs of
- 13 carriers, shippers and the general public. Our position
- 14 in this case does balance those interests and CSX's
- 15 position does not. On the comparison class issue, we
- 16 think the rules is this, and that's that courts should
- 17 compare the taxation of railroads to the taxation of the
- 18 mass of other businesses in the State with a focus on
- 19 whether a State is targeting or singling out railroads
- 20 for a tax that the general mass of other businesses do
- 21 not have to pay.
- 22 JUSTICE SCALIA: Well, it said that -- it
- 23 said that in -- in (b)(1), and it doesn't say that in
- 24 (b) (4).
- 25 MR. BRASHER: Right. I -- but I think --

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1 JUSTICE SCALIA: Another tax that
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- 2 discriminates is all it says, whereas in (1) it said "as
- 3 R value" -- "then the ratio that the assessed value of
- 4 other commercial and industrial property in the same
- 5 assessment jurisdiction."
- 6 MR. BRASHER: Well --
- 7 JUSTICE SCALIA: They're so specific there
- 8 and -- and in (4) they just say another tax that
- 9 discriminates against the rail carrier.
- 10 MR. BRASHER: But I think the question is
- 11 whether there's any reason to read (b)(4) to require a
- 12 comparison class that is different than the one in
- 13 (b) -- (b) (1), (b) (2), and (b) (3).
- 14 JUSTICE SCALIA: Yeah. There's a good
- 15 reason that they didn't spell out a specific comparison
- 16 class.
- 17 MR. BRASHER: Well, I don't think that --
- 18 that is a sufficient reason because I think that the
- 19 comparison class that is spelled out in (b)(1), (b)(2),
- and (b) (3), if you apply it in (b) (4), it ensures that
- 21 railroads are being treated fairly by tying them to a
- 22 broad enough mass of politically influential taxpayers
- 23 to keep their rates fair. And the competitor class here
- 24 that -- CSX has proposed makes very little sense in
- 25 the text of the statute.

- 2 sense in light of what this Court said in CSX 1 where
- 3 the Court said that, at the very least, we should be
- 4 looking at similarly situated taxpayers.
- 5 JUSTICE KAGAN: But, General, I think on --
- 6 on this question, CSX 1, I think your reasoning flies
- 7 straight into the face of it, because CSX 1 talks about
- 8 the notion that (1) through (3) is very different from
- 9 (4) and that you can't -- this is just along the lines
- 10 of what Justice Scalia says -- that you can't draw
- anything about the meaning of (4) from (1) through (3)
- 12 given that they clearly -- they use different language,
- 13 they're directed towards different things.
- MR. BRASHER: Well, I think -- I think the
- 15 question here is -- is whether you should be looking at
- 16 general businesses or whether you should be looking at
- 17 CSX's handpicked class of competitors. And we made the
- 18 textual argument that that's the only thing that the
- 19 text provides for. But I also think --
- JUSTICE GINSBURG: Well, why -- why do you
- 21 say handpicked? I -- I -- they're in the business of
- 22 transporting goods, motor carriers are and railroads
- 23 are.
- MR. BRASHER: Well, because in this
- 25 particular situation, CSX is comparing itself to motor

- 1 carriers and water carriers, but is not comparing itself
- 2 to, for example, airlines or pipelines, which also
- 3 compete with respect to CSX in transportation.
- 4 But I think -- I think there's no reason to
- 5 necessarily presume that competitors are similarly
- 6 situated, especially for the purposes of State taxation.
- 7 I mean, Amazon and Walmart are competitors, but for
- 8 State taxation, they are not similarly situated.
- 9 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Well, if they're not
- 10 similarly situated, then the railroad loses.
- 11 MR. BRASHER: That's right. And I think --
- 12 I think for the purposes of this tax --
- 13 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: But that's a
- 14 different question than saying what class they should be
- 15 compared to.
- 16 MR. BRASHER: I don't think so. Because I
- 17 think -- I think the question is -- is -- at the very
- 18 least, the question is what the comparison class should
- 19 be, and I think that CSX tells us at the very least,
- 20 they should be similarly situated to.
- JUSTICE KAGAN: But, you see, when you say
- "similarly situated," and I think that's right, but that
- 23 seems to go to your second argument, which is, look,
- they're not similarly situated because there's another
- 25 tax that falls upon motor carriers that doesn't fall

- 1 upon railroads, and that seems to me completely fair
- 2 and -- but -- but not on the first question.
- 3 MR. BRASHER: Well, let me -- let me explain
- 4 briefly on how I think it does go to the first question,
- 5 which is that we're talking about a sales and use tax,
- 6 which is a tax on a transaction. It's a tax on a
- 7 transaction for the purchase of tangible property. And
- 8 so the comparison class here should at least include the
- 9 many businesses that also pay that tax on the items
- 10 that they buy for their business. And railroads are no
- 11 more similarly situated to their competitors than they
- 12 are to every other business in the State that is also
- 13 paying the tax when it buys items that it needs for its
- 14 business.
- JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: But the problem is that,
- 16 generally, one thinks of sales and use taxes as flip
- 17 sides of each other. But here, the basis of a
- 18 comparison is not quite similar. Because in one it
- 19 measures what you buy, whether you use the gas in State
- 20 or out of State, and the other meant -- measures only
- 21 what you use in Alabama. So there is a dissimilarity in
- the comparison that's not the norm.
- 23 MR. BRASHER: Right. So -- so if you put
- 24 the comparison class issue aside and you look at the
- 25 comparison of the -- of the tax that the railroads pay and

- 1 the tax that the truckers pay, I think that they are
- 2 comparable in the sense that -- that those are the taxes
- 3 that they pay on diesel fuel. And they're comparable
- 4 really in two ways. As a practical matter, they are the
- 5 taxes that -- that both of these entities are paying on
- 6 diesel.
- 7 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: The circuit below said
- 8 that was fortuitous and that at some point that could
- 9 change.
- 10 MR. BRASHER: Well, I'm saying that as a
- 11 practical matter, they're -- they're the taxes that are
- 12 paid by these entities on diesel. And as a legal
- 13 matter, the exemption that Alabama is providing to the
- 14 truckers is because they are paying the other tax on the
- 15 same gallon of diesel.
- 16 JUSTICE ALITO: On the -- on the comparator
- 17 issue, suppose that railroads and trucks used exactly
- 18 the same fuel all the time, no difference whatsoever,
- 19 and suppose that Alabama taxed the fuel purchased by the
- 20 railroads but not by the trucks. Would there be a
- 21 violation then?
- 22 MR. BRASHER: Our position would be that,
- 23 no, there would not be a violation on the comparison
- 24 class issue as long as the general mass of businesses
- 25 are still paying the same tax rate. And the -- and the

- 1 reason I say that is because if you link the railroad's
- 2 taxation to the general mass of other businesses in the
- 3 State, then they're not paying an unfair tax rate.
- 4 JUSTICE ALITO: Do you think that result is
- 5 consistent with the purpose of this statute?
- 6 MR. BRASHER: Yes. And -- and the reason I
- 7 say that is because the 4-R Act was an omnibus bill. It
- 8 did many things. It, for example, appropriated almost
- 9 \$2 billion for -- for subsidies to the railroad
- 10 industry. But with this particular provision, what
- 11 Congress was getting at was it was trying to prevent
- 12 States from singling out or targeting railroads for
- 13 taxes, which, quite frankly, States have been doing for
- 14 years. And so that was the harm that Congress was
- 15 trying to prevent and that is a harm that would be
- 16 prevented if you used the general class --
- 17 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: No, but they wanted
- 18 to prop up -- they wanted to support the rail industry
- 19 in a number of ways. And it seems odd to say in a -- in
- 20 a situation where they were giving them this much money,
- 21 they still wanted to expose them to unfair competition
- 22 by States that want to give other modes of
- 23 transportation a tax benefit, but not to them.
- MR. BRASHER: Well --
- 25 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: And their --

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1 that's -- their economic viability depends upon how
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- 2 they're faring with respect to their competitors, not
- 3 how they're, you know, faring with respect to, you know,
- 4 an agricultural conglomerate in the State.
- 5 MR. BRASHER: Well, ultimately, railroads
- 6 are competing against other railroads. But I think
- 7 that --
- 8 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Well, no. They
- 9 compete against trucks, too.
- 10 MR. BRASHER: Well -- well, I think -- I
- 11 think there's some -- to a certain extent that they do
- 12 compete, but to a certain extent they're also
- 13 complementary forms of transportation. If there were
- 14 only trucks, they would be fine without railroads, but
- 15 the railroads couldn't exist without truckers.
- 16 JUSTICE KENNEDY: You really -- you want --
- 17 you -- you want us to write an opinion to say railroads
- 18 generally do not compete with trucking companies?
- 19 That -- you want that to be the opening line of our
- 20 opinion?
- 21 MR. BRASHER: No. No. I -- I think the
- 22 opening line of your opinion should be that courts
- 23 should compare the taxation of railroads to the taxation
- of the general mass of other businesses with a focus on
- 25 whether a State is singling out those businesses for a tax

- 1 that railroads --
- 2 JUSTICE BREYER: Well, then fine. Why don't
- 3 you have a kerosene tax? Everybody pays 8 percent
- 4 except for railroads. They have to pay 20 percent.
- 5 Okay? Now, it turns out that the only people who use
- 6 kerosene besides railroads are ice-cream wagons. Okay?
- 7 Isn't the comparison -- nobody else uses it. So
- 8 wouldn't you in that situation compare the railroads to
- 9 the ice-cream wagons? That's not the general. That
- 10 just happens that the State thought of a way of getting
- 11 the railroads.
- 12 So -- well, I would say, I guess that last
- 13 thing is to think, we know you're clever, State tax
- 14 authorities, and you'll figure out a million ways to do
- 15 this, but if whatever way you figure out discriminates
- 16 against the railroads, you lose. So why have a -- a
- 17 general class, a competitor class or some other class
- 18 that (4) is a catchall?
- 19 MR. BRASHER: Well, the why is because I
- 20 think the goal should be here to create some kind of
- 21 balance that actually gives enough ex ante guidance --
- 22 JUSTICE BREYER: Well, what about my case,
- 23 then, when you say balance, et cetera? Who wins?
- MR. BRASHER: Well, I think -- I think
- 25 ultimately, the railroads would probably win that case.

- 1 JUSTICE BREYER: Because we look at all the
- 2 tax, all the things, everybody pays 8 percent. That's
- 3 what it says.
- 4 MR. BRASHER: Oh, no. I'm sorry. But if --
- 5 JUDGE BREYER: But railroads.
- 6 MR. BRASHER: If there was a special tax on
- 7 kerosene and --
- 8 JUSTICE BREYER: Yeah.
- 9 MR. BRASHER: -- and the only two entities
- 10 that -- I mean, that -- that's -- for example, there's
- 11 a -- there's a case --
- 12 JUSTICE BREYER: All right. So now we're
- 13 comparing the two entities that use kerosene. We're
- 14 not comparing --
- JUSTICE SCALIA: Mr. Brasher, what -- what's
- 16 an ice cream wagon anyway?
- 17 (Laughter.)
- 18 JUSTICE BREYER: It's -- it's a wagon that
- 19 uses kerosene to deliver ice cream.
- 20 MR. BRASHER: But I think -- I think the
- 21 main point here is that there are lots of businesses in
- 22 Alabama that are paying the sales tax on the items that
- 23 they need for their business, and there are also lots of
- 24 businesses that are paying the sales tax on the diesel
- 25 fuel when they need diesel fuel for their businesses.

- 1 So manufacturers, mining companies, construction
- 2 companies, timber companies, those businesses are the
- 3 kinds of businesses that the railroads should be
- 4 compared to because that prevents them from being
- 5 treated unfairly.
- 6 JUSTICE ALITO: On the question of diesel
- 7 fuel, I -- I got the impression -- this just an
- 8 informational question -- but I got the impression from
- 9 briefs that diesel fuel is diesel fuel except some of it
- 10 is dyed. But is that -- is that true? Is it not the
- 11 case that the dyed diesel fuel has a higher sulfur
- 12 content than the clear diesel fuel and therefore costs
- 13 less?
- 14 MR. BRASHER: It's my understanding that
- 15 they are chemically the same. That -- that the law is
- 16 that the only difference between clear diesel fuel and
- 17 dyed diesel fuel is that dyed diesel fuel is diesel fuel
- 18 that has been indelibly dyed. So it's my understanding
- 19 that they are chemically the same.
- 20 It could be that the United States
- 21 government regulates those uses differently through some
- 22 kind of environmental regulation, but I'm not
- 23 aware of that.
- 24 But I think -- I think what the -- setting
- 25 the comparison class issue aside, what the district

- 1 court did here is exactly what this Court told it to do
- 2 when the Court remanded in -- in CSX 1, and that's it
- 3 looked at our justifications, it found that they had
- 4 nothing to do with railroads, and it also found that the
- 5 railroads weren't practically disadvantaged by the kind
- of treatment that they were getting and they weren't
- 7 practically disadvantaged with respect to truckers,
- 8 because the truckers are paying a higher tax on the
- 9 years at issue here. And the railroads could pay that
- 10 tax ultimately if they wanted to, but they don't want to
- 11 because they realize that they're actually paying a
- 12 lower tax rate on their diesel.
- 13 JUSTICE KAGAN: General, one of the things
- 14 that Mr. Phillips talks about is he -- he makes the
- 15 point that this is a very hard inquiry to carry out and
- 16 that the experience of courts, when they try to do this
- 17 in commerce cases, shows that. So what's your answer to
- 18 that?
- MR. BRASHER: Well, the -- the inquiry that
- 20 we're asking the Court to perform is not difficult at
- 21 all, and the district court performed it in one
- 22 paragraph of its decision, which is you simply compare
- 23 the taxes that we are imposing on diesel fuel for the
- 24 truckers versus the taxes that the railroads are paying
- 25 on the same item.

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1 And this is inherent in CSX's complaint in
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- 2 this case where CSX is asking the courts to compare its
- 3 taxes that it is paying on diesel fuel to the taxes that
- 4 its competitors are paying on diesel fuel. And so it's
- 5 inconsistent for CSX to be arguing that that's the
- 6 comparison and inquiry the courts should make, but at
- 7 the same time, courts can't make that inquiry.
- 8 And once again, as -- as a purely legal
- 9 matter, the tax exemption that we're talking about here
- 10 is in the same part of the code that imposes the tax
- 11 that the truckers have to pay. And the exemption reads,
- 12 it says if you pay the tax on clear diesel -- if you pay
- 13 the fuels tax that Alabama imposes, then you don't pay
- 14 any other tax imposed by State law. And so, as a purely
- 15 legal matter --
- 16 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: You're -- you -- are you
- 17 representing on the behalf of the State that the
- 18 railroads could pay the motor vehicle tax --
- 19 MR. BRASHER: Yes.
- 20 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: -- if they chose?
- 21 MR. BRASHER: Yes. And that was our
- 22 position in this Court in 2009 and it's -- it's a clear
- 23 reading of Alabama law because the reason the truckers
- 24 are getting the exemption is because they're paying the
- 25 other tax.

- 1 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: They use the same type
- 2 of diesel?
- 3 MR. BRASHER: The truckers use clear diesel,
- 4 which is chemically identified -- identical to the dyed
- 5 diesel that the railroads use.
- 6 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Can they use --
- 7 MR. BRASHER: Oh, I'm sorry.
- 8 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: -- according to -- in
- 9 Federal law, can the railroads use the undyed --
- 10 MR. BRASHER: As far as I'm aware, there is
- 11 no prohibition under Federal law. There is certainly no
- 12 prohibition on State law with respect to the railroads
- 13 using clear diesel.
- 14 JUSTICE ALITO: But the truckers can't use
- 15 the dyed fuel.
- 16 MR. BRASHER: That's correct.
- 17 JUSTICE ALITO: Why -- why is that?
- 18 MR. BRASHER: Well, it's because -- it's
- 19 because the tax on the clear diesel is higher than the
- 20 tax on the dyed diesel.
- 21 JUSTICE ALITO: So that would be why they
- 22 might not want to, but why --
- 23 MR. BRASHER: No. No. I think that's why
- 24 States and the Federal government are telling them that
- 25 they can't use the dyed diesel. Because we want them

- 1 to --
- 2 JUSTICE ALITO: It's not for environmental
- 3 reasons? Are you sure about that?
- 4 MR. BRASHER: I don't think so. I mean,
- 5 it's certainly the way this -- certainly the way this
- 6 started is -- is we started with a taxing scheme that
- 7 required truckers to pay what -- what at the time, at
- 8 least, was much, much higher than railroads were paying.
- 9 And so we wanted to prevent truckers from using the dyed
- 10 diesel.
- 11 The whole reason why we have clear diesel
- 12 and dyed diesel to begin with is -- is so that we could
- 13 support this taxing scheme where we're imposing a
- 14 per-gallon tax on the truckers.
- 15 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Now, talk about the
- 16 water carriers.
- 17 MR. BRASHER: Right.
- 18 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Are you going to suggest
- 19 that if they stop at a dock and eat a meal, they can't
- 20 be charged a sales tax?
- 21 MR. BRASHER: Well, I think the district
- 22 court said two things about water carriers and neither
- 23 one makes sense, which is that the railroads didn't show
- 24 any practical disadvantage with respect to water
- 25 carriers because the only evidence in the record with

1 respect to water carriers is that they make up 1 percent

- 2 of the market for shipping goods from one part of
- 3 Alabama to another.
- 4 And -- and to go back to the complementary
- 5 point that I was making earlier, the district court
- 6 also, quite rightly, refused to simply assume that
- 7 treating water carriers with this minor preference was
- 8 going to harm railroad's bottom line, and this is why:
- 9 Is that, for all we know, a perfectly reasonable
- 10 assumption would be if our tax pretreatment for water
- 11 carriers actually increase the amount of water commerce
- 12 coming into Alabama, that would also increase the amount
- 13 of commerce that railroads are moving from docks to
- 14 get to somewhere else in Alabama.
- 15 So in light of the fact that there was
- 16 essentially no evidence at all about water carriers to
- 17 show that railroads actually suffered some practical
- 18 disadvantage, I think the district court's reasoning --
- 19 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Well, there is a
- 20 practical disadvantage; they paid a tax that the water
- 21 carriers haven't --
- 22 MR. BRASHER: Well --
- 23 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: -- and it makes the
- 24 water carriers more competitive against them.
- 25 MR. BRASHER: Well, and my point, I think

- 1 the district court was right to say, well, they're only
- 2 1 percent of the market for moving goods from one part
- 3 of the --
- 4 JUSTICE KENNEDY: Well, but under your
- 5 argument then, you could give tax exemptions to many
- 6 businesses and then those businesses would grow and give
- 7 more goods to the railroads. So that's just simply --
- 8 that can't work.
- 9 MR. BRASHER: Well, I think -- I think -- my
- 10 point being is that if the only evidence is what the
- 11 railroads put into the record here, the district court
- doesn't have to assume that they're going to be
- 13 practically disadvantaged. CSX's position in this case
- 14 would mean that if the State offered a tax exemption or
- 15 tax incentive to a single competitor of a railroad, to a
- 16 single company that just operates in a single city of
- 17 the State, that CSX and every other railroad operating
- in the State would get exactly the same preference. And
- 19 we could be offering that preference to a single company
- 20 that costs the State \$10,000, but to offer the same
- 21 preference to the railroads would cost \$40 million.
- 22 JUSTICE ALITO: Well, why doesn't Alabama
- 23 tax the fuel purchased by the water -- water carriers?
- 24 It's kind of curious. Is it -- is it just a remnant of
- 25 an old understanding of the extent of -- of the State's

- 1 power?
- 2 MR. BRASHER: Yes. I -- I think it's for
- 3 historical reasons with respect to the taxation of
- 4 interstate commerce by water. The provision at issue
- 5 here actually taxes Alabama's own citizens when
- 6 they're -- when they're moving goods by water commerce
- 7 from one part of the State to the other. So we're
- 8 taxing that -- those transportation. We're only not
- 9 taxing it when someone moves goods from Alabama to some
- 10 other State.
- And that's another reason why I think the
- 12 water carriers are largely irrelevant, because the
- 13 railroads here aren't even asking for the same tax
- 14 treatment that we give to water carriers in that -- in
- 15 the sense that they don't want to pay taxes at all.
- 16 They don't want some kind of different treatment based
- on whether they're moving goods from one part of the
- 18 State to the other.
- 19 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: You -- you tax the
- 20 water carriers when they move within Alabama?
- 21 MR. BRASHER: We tax intrastate shipments.
- 22 So the exemption at issue here is only for the movement
- 23 of goods in interstate commerce.
- 24 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: How is that -- how
- 25 is that consistent with the statute admitting Alabama to

- 1 the Union, which says the water -- the first time -- the
- 2 water will remain -- forever remain public highways
- 3 without any tax, duty, impost or toll?
- 4 MR. BRASHER: Well, fortunately, we haven't
- 5 had that litigation, but --
- 6 (Laughter.)
- 7 MR. BRASHER: -- but I think -- but I
- 8 think -- to go -- to go to your point, Justice Alito, I
- 9 mean, the historical treatment of water carriers is
- 10 there's been historical preferences for water shipments
- 11 by interstate commerce in this country ever since it was
- 12 a country. And so that's the reason why we have this
- 13 preference in our tax code.
- 14 JUSTICE BREYER: You think that when we send
- 15 it back, if we did and you won, that suppose you win on
- 16 the ground that there is no fixed group, it depends on
- 17 the case who you compare them with. So here, compare
- 18 them with the trucks.
- Now, you'll say, as you do say, that we have
- 20 a very good reason for treating them differently. The
- 21 trucks have to pay this extra tax for the fuel, and
- 22 railroads don't. My quess is, and this is what I want
- 23 to know, that they'll come back and say, but the reason
- 24 that they pay that extra tax is to support highways, and
- 25 railroads don't use highways. And then you'll have to

- 1 figure out whether that is discrimination or isn't
- 2 discrimination, because indeed they do pay a higher tax.
- 3 But it is to go to highways, and does that count or not?
- 4 Now, my question, I don't think you can
- 5 answer that -- if you want to, try. I'm really just
- 6 interested, is that likely to be the shape of the
- 7 argument or not?
- 8 MR. BRASHER: Well, I think the district
- 9 court already addressed that. So you have a district
- 10 court opinion in this case which found in our favor
- 11 applying the competitive comparison class, and like I
- 12 said, put the comparison class to one side doing
- 13 effectively what the court told it to do in CSX 1. So
- 14 the district court already addressed that and decided
- 15 that when the State is -- is using tax revenue for
- 16 general public purposes, it really is irrelevant how the
- 17 State is raising that revenue. We could have a yearly
- 18 appropriation for highway maintenance and it would be
- 19 the same thing as having a dedicated source of funding
- 20 for highway maintenance. And it's not as if the
- 21 truckers are paying for all of Alabama's highway
- 22 maintenance. We're also taxing other people in the
- 23 State to add money to that to build highways. And so
- 24 ultimately, I think the district court was right that
- 25 that's just a red herring --

1 JUSTICE SCALIA: And the trucker tax is not

- 2 directed to highways exclusively? It goes into a
- 3 general fund?
- 4 MR. BRASHER: No, the -- the fuel tax that
- 5 the truckers are paying is set aside for highway
- 6 construction, highway maintenance. But my point is that
- 7 it's -- it's not as if the truckers are the only ones
- 8 paying for the highways to be built in Alabama; it's not
- 9 as if the truckers are the only ones using the highways.
- 10 We'd have to find some funds to build highways
- 11 regardless of how we get them.
- 12 And also, CSX's own expert, when testifying
- in this case, agreed that railroads also benefit from
- 14 roads, railroads also benefit from schools, and these
- 15 are the kind of indirect benefits that the State has to
- 16 provide as part of a general public purposes of the
- 17 State.
- But I think the real problem with CSX's
- 19 proposed rule in this case is that it provides zero ex
- 20 ante guidance to State policymakers about how to
- 21 structure a tax system in a way that doesn't
- 22 discriminate against railroads, but does actually
- 23 require them to pay their fair share. And I think
- 24 that's what the Court should focus on.
- 25 And the Eleventh Circuit's opinion in this

- 1 case in Footnote 5 of the opinion, the Eleventh Circuit
- 2 recognized that even if we were requiring truckers to
- 3 pay four times as much as we were requiring the
- 4 railroads to pay, the Eleventh Circuit would still find
- 5 that we are discriminating against railroads in that
- 6 circumstance.
- 7 I would like to reserve the remainder of my
- 8 time for rebuttal.
- 9 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you, counsel.
- 10 Ms. Goldenberg.
- ORAL ARGUMENT OF ELAINE J. GOLDENBERG
- 12 ON BEHALF OF THE UNITED STATES,
- 13 AS AMICUS CURIAE, SUPPORTING NEITHER PARTY
- MS. GOLDENBERG: Mr. Chief Justice, and may
- 15 it please the Court:
- We disagree with Petitioners as to the
- 17 comparison class issue and agree with Petitioners as to
- 18 the issue of the alternative and comparable tax on the
- 19 motor carriers. I'd like to start with the comparison
- 20 class issue if I could, although I'd like to devote time
- 21 to both of those issues.
- 22 With respect to the comparison class issue,
- 23 I do think, as Justice Scalia's question indicated, that
- 24 the omission of a specific comparison class in (b)(4) is
- 25 extremely telling here when there is such a specific

- 1 comparison class set forth in (b)(1) through (3). And I
- 2 also think it's very important that I think there is a
- 3 very good rational reason why Congress would have wanted
- 4 to leave the comparison class issue open with respect to
- 5 (b)(4) and not limit the comparison class in that arena
- 6 to other commercial and industrial entities. And the
- 7 reason is this: With respect to property taxes, I think
- 8 Congress can rest assured that virtually all commercial
- 9 and industrial entities are going to have real property
- 10 and that if you're grouping the railroads with those
- 11 entities and you're doing something unduly burdensome,
- 12 those entities are going to speak up, they're going to
- 13 use their political power, they're going to complain in
- 14 some way. And so it's protective of the railroads to
- 15 have that kind of comparison class.
- With respect to other kinds of taxation,
- 17 non-property taxation, I don't think you can say that
- 18 the same thing is true. And specifically with respect
- 19 to diesel fuel, I think, and I'm just hypothesizing
- 20 here, but it is very likely that there are many
- 21 commercial and industrial taxpayers who either don't use
- 22 diesel fuel at all or use very little diesel fuel in
- 23 their businesses, such that a tax on diesel fuel that
- 24 applies to them is a very small burden for them. And if
- 25 you are going to count on the fact that they're going to

- 1 speak up if there is a very burdensome diesel fuel tax
- 2 that's laid on them and on railroads, I don't think that
- 3 that holds true. And that's a situation in which, if
- 4 it's really railroads and their competitors who are
- 5 using the diesel fuel, then the competitors are the
- 6 comparison class that you ought to be looking to.
- 7 JUSTICE KAGAN: Ms. Goldenberg, could I ask,
- 8 you know, in one set of cases maybe a railroad is saying
- 9 we're being singled out. In another set of cases a
- 10 railroad comes in and says no, we're not being singled
- 11 out but our competitors are being treated better than we
- 12 are. Are there any other kinds of cases out there or is
- 13 it mostly just, you know, as compared to the general
- 14 taxpayer and as compared to competitors? Is there any
- 15 other way to -- to shape a complaint in this field?
- 16 MS. GOLDENBERG: As far as I'm aware, there
- 17 is not. And I'm not aware of cases that fall into any
- 18 other category besides those. And I think the reason is
- 19 that railroads don't make claims that people who aren't
- 20 their competitors -- a small group of people who aren't
- 21 their competitors are being treated differently than
- 22 they are. Because I think in situations like that it's
- 23 very easy for the State to come in and say, here is a
- 24 reasonable distinction between those other people and
- 25 you, the railroad.

- 1 So, for instance, you had a church or a
- 2 school that was being exempted from a tax that a
- 3 railroad paid, it would be extremely easy for the State
- 4 to say, well, churches and schools have socially
- 5 beneficial or charitable purposes, they're not involved
- 6 in business like railroads, railroads don't compete with
- 7 them and so it doesn't harm railroad's financial
- 8 stability to have them exempted.
- 9 So in some ways the comparison class of
- 10 competitors is sort of a proxy for the kinds of reasons
- 11 that the State is going to be able to give in order to
- 12 distinguish between the allegedly favored and less
- 13 favored groups.
- I'd also like to point out that I think
- 15 there are very serious problems with the singled out or
- 16 targeted requirement that the State is espousing here.
- 17 And that is that either -- depending on how you apply
- 18 it, it's going to be highly manipulatable by the State
- 19 or it's going to have major administrability problems,
- 20 and let me explain why.
- 21 If you have a true singled-out requirement,
- 22 so you find that railroads can't win a discrimination
- 23 claim under (b) (4) unless they are the only ones who are
- 24 subject to a tax, then I think it's extremely easy for
- 25 the State to evade any (b) (4) liability whatsoever

- 1 simply by grouping together with the railroads some
- 2 other entity or set of entities on whom the tax burden
- 3 doesn't fall very heavily or a set of entities that's
- 4 not very politically powerful and won't speak up, and in
- 5 virtually every case the State will be able to escape
- 6 from (b)(4) liability and sort of vitiate that
- 7 provision.
- 8 If you don't have a true singled-out
- 9 requirement, if you have a more kind of amorphous
- 10 targeting requirement, then I think you have very
- 11 problematic line-drawing issues. Because it's unclear
- 12 whether, if you've got five other entities grouped with
- 13 the railroad or ten other entities or 20 other entities,
- 14 whether that can -- constitutes targeting and where you
- 15 actually draw the line.
- And so I think that just applying the
- 17 definition of discriminates that this Court laid out in
- 18 its decision last time this case was here is actually
- 19 much easier to apply, much easier to administer than any
- 20 kind of targeted or singled-out requirement.
- 21 JUSTICE ALITO: Could I ask you about the
- 22 second point? What is your response to CSX's argument
- 23 that this is really a very, very difficult comparison to
- 24 make? And so here you have -- you have a formula that
- 25 will be beneficial to one side or the other depending on

- 1 the price of diesel fuel if, in fact, diesel fuel is
- 2 diesel fuel. But in one case, the tax is on the
- 3 purchase of the fuel, in the other case, the tax is on
- 4 the use of the fuel. They're used for different
- 5 purposes. And, you know, it's easy for -- for us to
- 6 say, well, okay, go back and, you know, do it, District
- 7 Court or court of appeals, but how would you do -- how
- 8 would you resolve those issues?
- 9 MS. GOLDENBERG: I think --
- 10 JUSTICE ALITO: Why is it a manageable
- 11 comparison to make?
- 12 MS. GOLDENBERG: I think with respect to
- 13 both of them there are -- I can explain why I think the
- 14 taxes are comparable despite the arguments that have
- 15 been raised.
- But I just want to back up and, for a
- 17 second, make a larger point which is, I think what the
- 18 lower court has done here and what courts of appeals
- 19 have done generally, is just sort of throw up their
- 20 hands and say under no possible circumstances could we
- 21 ever compare taxes, could we ever look beyond the face
- of the challenged tax. And that can't possibly be
- 23 correct.
- This Court, in its dormant commerce clause
- 25 cases, in its cases about discrimination against the

- 1 Federal government and those with whom it deals, does
- 2 just that. And there is no reason why the rule should
- 3 be narrower here.
- 4 JUSTICE KAGAN: Although I do think that
- one of Mr. Phillips' point is that maybe
- 6 those cases don't fill one with confidence.
- 7 MS. GOLDENBERG: Well, I think there is a
- 8 long history, particularly in the dormant commerce
- 9 clause area, of the Court looking to alternative and
- 10 comparable taxes. I think the Court has taken a very
- 11 narrow view of what constitutes a substantially
- 12 equivalent taxable item or event, for instance, and I
- don't disagree that that view could apply in this area.
- 14 JUSTICE ALITO: Well, you say it's doable,
- 15 so can you address --
- MS. GOLDENBERG: Yes.
- 17 JUSTICE ALITO: -- any of the points that I
- 18 mentioned? Does it matter that one -- that the -- the
- 19 revenue from one is dedicated to a single purpose rather
- 20 than going into the -- into the general pot? Does it
- 21 matter that one is a tax on purchase and the other is a
- 22 tax on use?
- 23 MS. GOLDENBERG: I'm happy to talk about
- 24 each of those. With respect to the first one, the
- 25 purpose for which the tax revenue is being used, I don't

- 1 think that that plays into the analysis under (b) (4)
- 2 about whether there is a discrimination in imposing the
- 3 tax. There may be, perhaps, in some dimension,
- 4 discrimination in how the State uses its tax revenues,
- 5 but that's not what the statute is about. This statute
- 6 is about the tax burden that's imposed --
- 7 JUSTICE BREYER: Well, wait a minute, wait a
- 8 minute. Why? The obvious case which is right here is
- 9 that the railroads say, you're taxing us at a higher
- 10 rate. The State's response is, true, but we do it
- 11 because the trucks pay even more for their diesel fuel.
- 12 There's a higher tax. Their response is, but the reason
- 13 that they do that is because they use highways and we
- 14 want to pay for those.
- Now, in terms of just pure logic, that is a
- 16 point; isn't it? And so that -- that's what I think is
- 17 one example of what Justice Alito was driving at. And
- 18 why -- why do you not have to take that into account,
- 19 and if you do, how?
- 20 MS. GOLDENBERG: Well, I don't think you
- 21 have to take it into account. What I'm suggesting is I
- don't think the analysis should go beyond the imposition
- 23 of --
- JUSTICE BREYER: Because?
- 25 MS. GOLDENBERG: -- the tax and the tax

- 1 burden because of the language of (b)(4) and also
- 2 because otherwise you would end up in a very bizarre
- 3 situation where you could have a unitary tax that fell
- 4 on motor carriers and railroads equally. There's one
- 5 tax provision that says motor carriers and railroads,
- 6 you both pay "X" cents per gallon on your fuel and a
- 7 railroad could nevertheless come in and claim
- 8 discrimination under (b) (4) if the State took that tax
- 9 revenue and used it to build roads. That seems like an
- 10 awfully strange result.
- 11 It would also mean that you could have the
- 12 same tax structure in different states that would be
- 13 discriminatory in one state and not discriminatory in
- 14 another, depending on how the state spent its revenues.
- I also agree with what my friend from
- 16 Alabama said with respect to the evidence in the record
- 17 here about how the -- the motor carriers aren't being in
- 18 some way kind of especially or uniquely benefitted by
- 19 the roads, using money to build roads benefits the
- 20 general public and it also benefits railroads.
- 21 Railroads use trucks to bring freight to and from their
- 22 trains and they are part of the system of the state
- 23 where everybody needs these roads. And it may be that
- 24 motor carriers benefit a little bit more than other
- 25 people, but it is for the general welfare. That's what

- 1 a tax is.
- 2 JUSTICE BREYER: What about the second part,
- 3 that it -- does it make a difference taxes on use as
- 4 opposed to taxes on sales?
- 5 MS. GOLDENBERG: I don't think it makes a
- 6 difference that one is on use and one is on sale. For
- 7 one thing, I do think that as a practical matter those
- 8 categories kind of blur together here. Motor carriers
- 9 pay at the pump, which they, I think, experience as a
- 10 tax on sales. Then later, under the International Fuel
- 11 Tax Agreement, the State takes the money and kind of
- 12 sends it around in this clearinghouse system to other
- 13 states where the fuel may have been used. But it's not
- 14 something that I think the motor carrier necessarily
- 15 experiences as different than a sales tax.
- And on the other side of the equation, the
- 17 railroads do pay -- they're complaining about sales and
- 18 use taxes. My understanding is that railroads generally
- 19 purchase their fuel, their diesel fuel, wholesale. The
- 20 definition of "retail sale" in the Alabama tax law says
- 21 that when you buy wholesale, what counts as a retail
- 22 sale is the withdrawal, use or consumption of the item.
- 23 So I think the --
- JUSTICE SCALIA: What about water carriers?
- 25 Are you going to say anything about that.

- 1 MS. GOLDENBERG: Certainly. In our view,
- 2 the water carriers issue should be remanded to the court
- 3 of appeals in the first instance because it hasn't
- 4 addressed the district court's reasons why there is no
- 5 discrimination. We are dubious that the district
- 6 court's reasons are correct, but in any event, we'd urge
- 7 the Court not to simply decide the water carriers issue
- 8 without deciding the alternative and comparable tax
- 9 issue because, in that case, we think the state could
- 10 just change the statute with respect to water carriers
- 11 and all the motor carrier-related issues would remain.
- 12 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Do you think that -- that
- 13 the ruling, the district court's ruling on the
- 14 comparability of the taxes is also dubious?
- 15 MS. GOLDENBERG: The district court's ruling
- 16 on --
- 17 JUSTICE GINSBURG: The district court found
- 18 that these were complementary or --
- 19 MS. GOLDENBERG: No. We agree that the
- 20 district court analyzed the comparability of the taxes
- 21 correctly and did so with the agreement of the parties
- 22 as to how they should be compared.
- 23 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you, counsel.
- Mr. Phillips.
- ORAL ARGUMENT OF CARTER G. PHILLIPS

- 1 ON BEHALF OF THE RESPONDENT
- 2 MR. PHILLIPS: Thank you, Mr. Chief Justice,
- 3 and may it please the Court:
- 4 Let me begin by debunking a -- a statement
- 5 that gets repeated often in this litigation which is
- 6 that somehow the railroads are here seeking a
- 7 most-favored nation opportunity.
- 8 The truth is Alabama -- in Alabama, we pay
- 9 \$10 million a year in sales taxes. We pay taxes every
- 10 time we buy gasoline or -- or fuel that we use on road.
- 11 We do that all the time. We have no quarrel with that,
- 12 we don't have any objection to that.
- 13 What we do --
- 14 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Why do you bother? If
- 15 you're going to be taxed at \$10 million, why don't you
- 16 buy it in the adjoining state before you cross the
- 17 Alabama lines?
- MR. PHILLIPS: Well, I mean, there -- there
- 19 are ways of doing business, but we also are entitled to
- 20 the protections under the 4-R Act which is designed,
- 21 candidly, to ensure that our financial stability which
- 22 means that we ought to always be in a position where we
- 23 can approach all of our business decisions in the most
- 24 efficient way and hopefully put ourselves in a position
- 25 in order to compete against the motor carriers and

- 1 the -- and the water carriers.
- 2 And that's precisely what the comparison
- 3 class takes you to, which is, it's all well and good to
- 4 say that, you know, the statute addresses targeting.
- 5 And that's fine, and that's clearly right because that's
- 6 what Congress undeniably saw primarily in the count of
- 7 (b) (1) to (b) (3) range, and that's why it identified
- 8 this specific class that it was worried about for
- 9 targeting.
- 10 But when it gets to the point of talking
- 11 about every other form of discrimination, another tax
- 12 that discriminates, in that context it only makes sense
- 13 to think about this in the context of your competitors,
- 14 because Congress's other purpose in this was to ensure
- 15 that there would be financial stability, that the
- 16 railroads would, once again, be able to operate on their
- 17 own.
- And, obviously, to the extent that you've
- 19 authorized the states to choose, for whatever reason, to
- 20 benefit motor and water carriers routinely to the
- 21 detriment of the railroads, that completely undermines
- 22 it.
- 23 So it seems to me, and -- and my colleague
- from the Solicitor General's Office has done an
- 25 excellent job of sort of going through the various

- 1 points on the comparison class, I'm happy to answer any
- 2 questions on that further, but I'm more inclined to deal
- 3 with the justifications.
- 4 On the justifications --
- 5 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Well, just on the
- 6 comparison class, can't you let the water carriers go?
- 7 I mean, it's a very tiny percentage that's at issue.
- 8 It's governed by the admission to the Union. They
- 9 sometimes touch down in Alabama, they sometimes don't.
- 10 And I don't want to have the case up here a third time.
- 11 MR. PHILLIPS: I -- I won't take that last
- 12 comment personally, Mr. Chief Justice.
- 13 The -- I mean, they have 1 percent of the
- 14 market; we have 6 percent of the market. That's --
- 15 that's -- that's still an important competitor of ours.
- 16 They stipulated -- it's in their stipulation, these are
- 17 a major competitor, we compete in a major way on the
- 18 basis of the fuel that we use.
- 19 We're talking about a statute at the time
- 20 that was designed to ensure against the nonsurvival of
- 21 the railroad industry. I think the idea -- first of
- 22 all, Congress knows how to incorporate a de minimus
- 23 exception. It did it in the -- in the component dealing
- 24 with (b)(1), (b)(3) as it gets applied. It didn't do it
- in (b) (4). And so, therefore, as much as I would

- 1 prefer -- and actually, I can get you out of coming back
- 2 here, because if you say that the water carriers are --
- 3 are, in fact, within the class to be evaluated, there is
- 4 no justification put forward. The Eleventh Circuit is
- 5 100 percent correct about that.
- 6 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: So if there's one
- 7 water carrier, you win? Or if there's one odd method of
- 8 transportation, you win?
- 9 MR. PHILLIPS: I -- I --
- 10 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: That sounds like
- 11 most-favored nation to me.
- MR. PHILLIPS: No, but that's not -- that's
- 13 not the way the case comes here. The case comes here
- 14 with a stipulation that water carriers are a major
- 15 competitor of ours. It's not that there's only one of
- 16 them. It's that there is a significant amount of
- 17 traffic that flows.
- We have 6 percent --
- 19 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: The district court --
- 20 MR. PHILLIPS: -- they have 1 percent.
- JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: The district court
- 22 appeared in its opinion -- and I -- and I may be wrong
- 23 -- to say that you, in fact, had not proven that they
- 24 were really competitors. It seemed to say you had not
- 25 shown the competitive impact.

- 1 MR. PHILLIPS: Right.
- 2 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: And that's what I took
- 3 it to be saying, that you hadn't shown that they really
- 4 do take resources away from you.
- 5 MR. PHILLIPS: Well, first of all, that's
- 6 inconsistent with the stipulation. But, two, the
- 7 district court got it a 100 percent wrong. Even as
- 8 Judge Cox, in his dissenting opinion, said in the
- 9 Eleventh Circuit, which is that we satisfy our -- our
- 10 obligation to demonstrate the prima facie case by
- 11 showing that the water carriers are flatly exempt on the
- 12 face of the statute. That's facial discrimination. It
- 13 becomes the state's burden at that point to justify it.
- And if the state had wanted to come in and
- 15 say, oh, sure we can justify it because they're not
- 16 really competitors in some sense, that would be fine.
- 17 But that's not their stipulation. Their stipulation is
- 18 that this is a major competitor of ours and on -- on a
- 19 subject matter, fuel, that is a major portion of the way
- 20 in which we compete against each other.
- 21 So I think, Your Honor, the easiest way not
- 22 to have to see me again -- at least representing CSX in
- 23 this context -- is to say water carriers count, it's
- 24 their stipulation, we shouldn't have had to get to this
- 25 issue in any event because I don't think it was in the

- 1 cert petition, and there's really no reason to go ahead
- 2 and try to sort out the thorny issues that Justice Alito
- 3 was talking about as to how you're going to try, from
- 4 here on, to apply the comparability standard in this
- 5 particular case.
- 6 Alabama wants to do it in a very
- 7 simpleminded way, how much are you paying today and how
- 8 much are they paying today, and if it's close enough,
- 9 that's good enough for government work.
- 10 The problem with that is, is that all of the
- 11 case law that deals with comparability -- and this
- 12 Court's decisions have run about as far away from
- 13 notions of comparability as you can since it first
- 14 adopted the rule to deal with this straight, strict,
- 15 sales tax and use tax, which really are the mirror image
- 16 of each other. Ever since then, every other tax has
- 17 been analyzed under those standards. The Court has
- 18 said, no, no, that's not the way we're going to do --
- 19 we're not going to get into that comparability analysis.
- 20 And I -- I would most -- most particularly
- 21 point you in the direction of Professor Hellerstein --
- 22 Hellerstein's brief where he describes -- he says, look,
- 23 if it's true comparability, that's one thing. But we're
- 24 talking here about taxes that are -- the taxes that are
- 25 not mutually exclusive proxies for each other. They're

- 1 imposed on different activities at different rates and
- 2 for different purposes. And how we're going to ask a
- 3 district court to say these are sufficiently similar --
- 4 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: I'm -- I'm just not
- 5 moved by the purpose part for the following reason. I
- 6 think your brother was absolutely correct that how the
- 7 state uses its tax revenues is a personal decision by
- 8 it. It could have put all of the money into the
- 9 treasury and said, but we're going to calculate what we
- 10 spend on highways according to this formula, because we
- 11 want to do it. That's exactly what they've done here.
- 12 They could say we're going to beautify the
- 13 route for railroads, and we're going to give them X
- 14 amount of money to do that from our state treasury, and
- 15 we're calculating it a little bit from the fuel they
- 16 bought.
- MR. PHILLIPS: But, Justice Sotomayor, I
- 18 think it's a more -- it should be a more nuanced
- 19 analysis than that. And -- and I -- and I disagree with
- 20 my friend from the Solicitor General's office on -- on
- 21 this particular point. Because when -- when you're
- 22 talking about the use that's put to it, there's no
- 23 question -- we -- we couldn't bring a claim that says,
- 24 we're -- we're taxed exactly the same in all ways, you
- 25 know. It's two sales taxes, one's called a sales tax

- 1 against railroads and the other is called a sales tax
- 2 against motor carriers, and -- and come back in and say,
- 3 but you're going to use that money for their benefit and
- 4 not for our benefit. That -- we couldn't make that
- 5 claim, that -- no doubt about that, and we've never made
- 6 a claim like that.
- 7 But it is -- the situation is reversed.
- 8 They have created an exemption for motor carriers. It
- 9 is now their burden to justify, in all respects
- 10 consistent with the overall purposes of the statute,
- 11 that exemption. And there, it seems to me, it is fair
- 12 game for us to say, wait a second, what are you going to
- 13 use that money for. You're using that money to benefit
- 14 the -- the -- the motor carriers. Now, we pay money to
- 15 that, and we benefit that -- we benefit from that, too,
- 16 when we actually use the highways. But what
- 17 this money is designed for and what the motor carriers
- 18 want is more taxes like that because that way they
- 19 improve the quality of the roads, and it helps them to
- 20 be a better competitor against us.
- It seems to me, in a situation where you're
- 22 trying to justify discrimination against us designed to
- 23 eliminate the possibility of undermining our ability to
- 24 compete, whether or not that the State uses that money
- 25 for to undermine our ability to compete, should still be

- 1 fair game under (b) (4). And that's why I would urge the
- 2 Court to read Professor Hellerstein's brief and analyze
- 3 the complexities that are embedded in the regime the
- 4 State asks you to go to. If you don't want to go that
- 5 far, then I'd ask you to simply say that water carriers
- 6 is enough on a basis to say this is unconstitutional and
- 7 affirm the Eleventh Circuit.
- 8 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Now, just to get
- 9 back to them, it's 1 percent and 6 percent of what?
- 10 MR. PHILLIPS: Of the interstate business.
- 11 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Interstate business.
- 12 JUSTICE BREYER: Did -- did the court of
- 13 appeals deal with your point you just made about the --
- 14 a special purpose of the extra tax that the truckers
- 15 pay?
- 16 MR. PHILLIPS: Not in -- not in precisely
- 17 those terms.
- 18 JUSTICE BREYER: What I'm trying to figure
- 19 out is -- is how are they supposed to conduct this
- 20 comparison analysis?
- MR. PHILLIPS: Well, that -- no, but that is
- 22 exactly --
- JUSTICE BREYER: What they did is they
- 24 didn't do it.
- MR. PHILLIPS: No, no. But that's exactly

- 1 what the Eleventh Circuit said --
- 2 JUSTICE BREYER: Right.
- 3 MR. PHILLIPS: -- is that once you open that
- 4 box and get into the business, all other kinds of things
- 5 that Professor Hellerstein tells you you have to look
- 6 at, the inquiry becomes limitless and that the
- 7 carrier --
- 8 JUSTICE BREYER: Well, fine. But suppose
- 9 that the -- suppose the reason that the truckers have to
- 10 pay this extra tax is not to go into a fund that
- 11 benefits them. Suppose, indeed, it's to go into a fund
- 12 that benefits railroads. I mean, so -- so doesn't --
- 13 you have to -- you have to say whether or not -- you
- 14 wouldn't say that no matter what the purpose of this
- 15 extra tax is don't consider it, would you?
- 16 MR. PHILLIPS: Well, what I would say is,
- 17 when you know that the taxes are not mutually exclusive
- 18 proxies, I mean, the question is -- I don't think this
- 19 Court is going to have any -- any ability to sort of sit
- 20 down here and try to come up with a set of standards of
- 21 comparability.
- 22 What I would ask the Court to look at is in
- 23 this case what do we know? That these are taxed on --
- 24 these are imposed on different activities, the privilege
- 25 of using the roads as opposed to a sales tax, at

- 1 different rates, 15 cents versus 4 percent which, in the
- 2 last four years, we know have -- have been to the
- 3 disadvantage of the railroads, and in this case, for
- 4 different purposes.
- 5 The fact that there may be another case in
- 6 which they decide to make them for the same purpose,
- 7 that would still not modify the core of what the
- 8 comparability analysis requires, this -- which remains
- 9 enormously complicated and not -- and, to my mind at
- 10 least, not worth the candle.
- 11 JUSTICE BREYER: Of course it isn't. You
- 12 won. And -- and the -- the -- and what --
- MR. PHILLIPS: Well, even if I --
- 14 JUSTICE BREYER: What's worry -- what's
- 15 worrying me is --
- 16 MR. PHILLIPS: For an academic I would
- 17 say the same thing.
- 18 JUSTICE BREYER: -- you know, but it's
- 19 not -- it's -- State taxes are so complex and -- and
- 20 that they didn't even have a -- they didn't really have
- 21 a chance -- they could have, but they didn't, go into
- 22 the what is this extra tax the truckers pay, is it
- 23 comparable, and that's a good reason for having them pay
- less sales tax, or does it really have nothing to do
- 25 with the price of anything and, therefore, it's a bad

- 1 reason and, therefore, you win. They didn't consider
- 2 that. That's what's worrying me. And if I send it
- 3 back, if I -- if we do that, not only do we have to do
- 4 it, they have to go through all this again.
- 5 MR. PHILLIPS: Well --
- 6 JUSTICE BREYER: We're going to have to tell
- 7 them just what to do, which that sounds worse to me,
- 8 and -- and, moreover, it may come back here again.
- 9 MR. PHILLIPS: We can -- we can -- I
- 10 understand all that. But -- but it seems to me, Justice
- 11 Breyer, everything you just said there should lead to
- 12 the conclusion that the right answer here is to affirm
- 13 and -- and to do so because they had the opportunity to
- 14 put in evidence. They -- they followed a simpleminded
- 15 approach, as of day one, there is -- this is the amount
- of money that's being paid, that's close enough for me,
- 17 we're done, as opposed to the true comparability
- 18 analysis that would be required.
- 19 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: How do we do that? How
- 20 do we do that with -- with the water carriers? I -- I
- 21 do see your point with respect to the motor vehicle
- 22 drivers because there the entire argument was around
- 23 comparability and was it comparable. And the court
- 24 said -- but it basically said we're not going to get
- 25 into it. If they call it something else, we won't do

- 1 it.
- 2 MR. PHILLIPS: But --
- 3 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: It didn't quite say what
- 4 you said.
- 5 MR. PHILLIPS: No, but I -- I think, one,
- 6 the Court can certainly recognize that what I said is
- 7 precisely part of the problem that comes out of the
- 8 comparability analysis. Once you get into evaluating
- 9 different purposes --
- 10 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Now -- now you want a
- 11 really broad rule that says you've got to -- you've got
- 12 to use the same label on every tax, States. You've got
- 13 to treat competitors with the same label all of the
- 14 time.
- MR. PHILLIPS: Well, it's the same tax. I
- 16 mean, I -- I don't know.
- 17 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: Well --
- 18 MR. PHILLIPS: At the end of the day, that
- 19 is the rule I'm hoping for.
- 20 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: If they -- if they had
- 21 done a mirror excise tax, you would have been happy?
- 22 MR. PHILLIPS: I -- yes, I would not have a
- 23 complaint on that score. On the other -- but just to be
- 24 clear, Justice Sotomayor --
- 25 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: But that's still a

- 1 comparability issue.
- 2 MR. PHILLIPS: Right.
- JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: We've always said --
- 4 MR. PHILLIPS: But it's a single compare --
- 5 comparability issue. The problem here is if you go down
- 6 the road of sufficient justification, it is an
- 7 extraordinarily complicated comparability issue. And I
- 8 would hope the Court wouldn't want to go down that road
- 9 more than because I won this case, but more
- 10 fundamentally, the Court doesn't have to go down that
- 11 road because there is a major competitor and there was
- 12 never a justification given for that reason.
- 13 JUSTICE SOTOMAYOR: All right. On the water
- 14 carriers it never addressed the -- the court below never
- 15 addressed -- the Eleventh Circuit never addressed the
- 16 reasons that were given.
- MR. PHILLIPS: Well, that's because the
- 18 reasons they were given were completely -- well, the --
- 19 the concurring -- the concurring Judge Cox did. He said
- 20 those reasons don't justify it because all he said was
- 21 you -- and -- and if you look at the district court's
- 22 rationale, it -- it won't get you home either because,
- 23 again, first it said it's our burden to demonstrate that
- 24 there's -- that there's been an injury. That's not our
- 25 burden. We satisfied our burden, and the Eleventh

- 1 Circuit said that when we -- when we came forward.
- 2 Then -- so it was there -- therefore, with
- 3 an exemption, their burden to show why. The only thing
- 4 they came up with was -- or what the only thing the
- 5 district court bought was, well, we hadn't proved --
- 6 once again putting the burden on us -- that this would
- 7 be constitutional in all circumstances. That's not
- 8 enough to justify allowing an exemption like that to
- 9 remain in place.
- 10 And -- and essentially the court of appeals
- 11 basically said there is no rational justification for
- 12 it. There's none -- not been one put forward. It --
- 13 it's a relic of 50 years ago, and that's not a
- 14 sufficient -- I would hope that's not a sufficient
- 15 justification in the meaning of the Court's prior
- 16 opinion.
- 17 If there are no other further questions,
- 18 I'll let you make --
- 19 JUSTICE GINSBURG: Yes. So what do you do
- 20 with -- the -- the district judge did make the
- 21 comparison between the motor carrier tax, and -- and
- 22 you -- you say that -- that comparison was inadequate
- 23 because?
- 24 MR. PHILLIPS: Because it didn't -- it
- 25 didn't take into account the rest of the analysis. It

- 1 didn't deal with the purpose; it didn't deal with the
- 2 nature of the tax. All it said was that at a particular
- 3 arbitrary point in time, the amounts in -- the amounts
- 4 weren't all that different.
- 5 JUSTICE GINSBURG: But it also said that if
- 6 you don't engage in that kind of comparison, then you're
- 7 going to end up with the railroad becoming the most
- 8 favored taxpayer.
- 9 MR. PHILLIPS: But that's just a conclusion,
- 10 and it's not -- it's not true. Because it is always
- 11 available to the State to put our competitors in the
- 12 same position we are in. And if for some reason that's
- 13 not possible, then that might well be a sufficient
- 14 justification for some differential tax.
- But it is all -- in this context, it is
- 16 clearly possible. There's no problem, you know,
- 17 removing the exemption for the -- for the sales tax that
- 18 the water carriers pay. There is no problem imposing a
- 19 4 percent sales tax on the clear fuel that the motor
- 20 carriers pay. If they do that, we're done.
- 21 JUSTICE KAGAN: Is --
- 22 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: I might have -- I
- 23 might have missed it, but why isn't it a sufficient
- 24 justification for different treatment of the water
- 25 carriers that the statute admitting Alabama to the union

- 1 said they couldn't tax traffic on the river?
- 2 MR. PHILLIPS: Well, I think because the --
- 3 the chain -- because the Constitution has changed.
- 4 First of all, I don't know what --
- 5 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: The Constitution
- 6 might have changed, but the statute didn't.
- 7 MR. PHILLIPS: But I don't know that that's
- 8 a tax on the river because that could just be a tax
- 9 that's designed to deal with, like, a toll road. So I
- 10 don't know what that language actually refers to. This
- 11 is just a tax on gasoline that's being used to allow you
- 12 to get on the river.
- So I don't -- I don't know -- I mean, this
- 14 is -- given that this wasn't the subject of any scrutiny
- 15 by anyone, nor put forward in any serious way, I
- 16 don't -- I mean, that -- I don't think it's a legitimate
- 17 justification.
- But -- but in any event, it's still
- 19 available to Alabama. Well, I -- I suppose you could
- 20 say Alabama would take the risk if it -- if it removes
- 21 the exemption that somebody would bring suit against
- 22 them, but I don't think that's a very serious challenge.
- 23 JUSTICE KENNEDY: So suppose the State taxed
- 24 railroads at 4 percent, but then gave them a -- a credit
- 25 against what they paid on the highway tax. Would you be

- 1 back in the same position you are now?
- 2 MR. PHILLIPS: Gave an exemption to the --
- 3 I'm sorry?
- 4 JUSTICE KENNEDY: That they gave -- they
- 5 gave a deduction for the sales tax against what they've
- 6 paid in highway taxes.
- 7 MR. PHILLIPS: So you're talking about the
- 8 railroads and what we pay a highway tax?
- 9 JUSTICE KENNEDY: No, so the -- the
- 10 truckers.
- 11 MR. PHILLIPS: I just want to make sure I
- 12 understand.
- 13 JUSTICE KENNEDY: I -- I misstated.
- 14 They taxed the truckers the same as they tax you, 4
- 15 percent.
- 16 MR. PHILLIPS: Right.
- 17 JUSTICE KENNEDY: But then they give the
- 18 truckers a deduction for whatever they paid in the
- 19 highway tax.
- 20 MR. PHILLIPS: Well, no. Then I think we'd
- 21 be right back to the same -- same boat.
- 22 JUSTICE KAGAN: As -- as I understand the
- 23 court of appeals' judgment as to the truckers, the court
- 24 of appeals just said it's too complicated, forget it,
- 25 we're not even going to look at Alabama's argument.

- 1 Now you're here and you're saying, well,
- 2 Alabama's argument is too simple. There's a whole raft
- 3 of other things to -- to include in the analysis of
- 4 whether that tax on the truckers is, in fact,
- 5 comparable.
- But the decision that we have before us just
- 7 threw up its hands and refused to look at the whole
- 8 alternative tax issue. That seems, to me, a problem for
- 9 you, isn't it?
- 10 MR. PHILLIPS: Well, in the first place,
- 11 it's not a problem for me if you decide on the water
- 12 carriers. But even on its own terms, it seems to me
- 13 this Court has previously recognized in Snead, in a
- 14 similar anti-discrimination provision, that it is simply
- 15 not appropriate to do the kind of simple analysis
- 16 Alabama proposes here and just say, at the end of the
- day, electricity is going to be better off in-state than
- 18 out-of-state or out-of-state than in-state so don't
- 19 worry about it, we're good.
- JUSTICE KAGAN: Well, doesn't it have to be
- 21 appropriate as going in that Alabama can say, here's the
- 22 tax that we impose on truckers? They're really being
- 23 treated in the exact same way just under two different
- 24 provisions of the tax code, and then it's up to you to
- 25 say why that's wrong.

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1 MR. PHILLIPS: Right, but -- and -- and we
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- 2 did say why that's wrong.
- 3 JUSTICE KAGAN: But that's not what the
- 4 court of appeals said. The court of appeals did not
- 5 say, oh, you know, CSX has convinced us that these are
- 6 not comparable taxes. Instead, what the court of
- 7 appeals said is we're not even going to look at whether
- 8 they are comparable taxes.
- 9 MR. PHILLIPS: Right. And -- and I
- 10 realize -- I recognize a bit of a disconnect there. But
- 11 the reason why they said they weren't going to get
- 12 engaged in that inquiry is because the very items I've
- 13 identified, the nature of the tax, the purpose of the
- 14 tax, the incidence of the tax, are very -- are all
- 15 complicated issues and you can go through the rest of
- 16 the Hellerstein criteria -- very complicated issues, and
- if the State is only going to come in here and try to
- 18 defend itself on the basis that at one point in time the
- 19 money is pretty close, that's not going to get it done.
- 20 And so then the question is -- and this is
- 21 where I think the Eleventh Circuit said, look, this is
- 22 clearly not enough -- we're not going to go down this
- 23 path and so that's the ruling.
- Now, if the Court wants to quarrel with
- 25 that, at some point, I don't think this is the right

- 1 case in which to do that. First of all, this issue
- 2 wasn't presented in the cert petition. And second of
- 3 all, it's -- it's completely unnecessary to resolve this
- 4 particular case properly. You can affirm on at least
- 5 two alternative reasons without having to go down the
- 6 path of figuring out exactly whether comparability is
- 7 worth a candle.
- 8 If there are no further questions now, I'll
- 9 let you get your lunch.
- 10 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you, counsel.
- 11 General Brasher, you have five minutes.
- 12 REBUTTAL ARGUMENT OF ANDREW L. BRASHER
- 13 ON BEHALF OF THE PETITIONERS
- 14 MR. BRASHER: Thank you, Mr. Chief Justice:
- 15 Let me just make a few quick points. One is
- 16 that if you adopt the position that the State's
- 17 justifications matter, it's no more difficult to analyze
- 18 a justification that has to do with another tax of any
- 19 other justification. As a matter of fact, it's a lot
- 20 easier because you can just use math as opposed to
- 21 evaluating some other justification.
- 22 And the justification with respect to the
- 23 truckers is that we are obligated under a series of
- 24 interstate agreements, international agreements and
- 25 Federal law, to impose a per-gallon tax on the truckers.

- 1 And then once you impose that tax on the truckers, the
- 2 question arises should you also impose an additional
- 3 sales tax on the same transaction as the purchase of
- 4 diesel fuel. And it makes perfect sense for the State
- 5 to say, as a policy matter, that we're not going to
- 6 double tax the same transaction.
- 7 It was surprising to hear my friend talk
- 8 about how he would be fine if the State tried to treat
- 9 railroads in a way that was the same as truckers,
- 10 because that's exactly what the State of Tennessee did
- 11 and it found itself in a real quandary that this Court
- 12 needs to prevent. Which is the railroads were arguing
- 13 that Tennessee was discriminating against them because
- 14 the railroads weren't treated like truckers. They won
- 15 that litigation. And then -- so Tennessee turned around
- 16 and tried to craft a statute that treated railroads
- 17 exactly the same way as truckers. And then the railroad
- 18 sued again saying that they were being targeted or
- 19 singled out for a tax that no one else had to pay.
- 20 And I think that is a necessary implication
- 21 of the rule that my friend on the other side is adopting
- 22 which is that it is -- it is discrimination to treat
- 23 railroads unlike anyone that they particularly say that
- 24 they compete with and it's also discrimination to try to
- 25 avoid that discrimination.

- 1 And the other point I would make is that
- 2 we're not talking in this case about a tax on diesel
- 3 fuel. We're talking about a sales tax. When CSX sends
- 4 us a check for their taxes, there is one line and it
- 5 says sales tax. This is how much we pay to the State
- 6 basis on sales tax. And everybody else, all the other
- 7 businesses in the State that have to pay the sales tax
- 8 on the items that they need for their businesses, are
- 9 sending us the same check that says this is what we have
- 10 to pay on sales tax.
- 11 And with respect to diesel specifically,
- 12 manufacturing companies, timber companies, construction
- 13 companies, when they send us a check, they -- they say
- 14 sales tax and that includes everything else that they
- 15 have to pay on the sales tax and the diesel fuel. And
- 16 that money that we're using, that we're collecting by
- 17 the sales tax, goes to -- primarily for education, which
- 18 is something that the railroads benefit from just like
- 19 everyone else in the State.
- But ultimately what we're asking the Court
- 21 to do is adopt a rule that if we are using the -- the
- 22 hand-picked class of competitors, that the courts
- 23 actually have to weigh a State's reasons for the
- 24 exemptions in its tax code and with a focus on whether
- 25 the railroads are suffering any practical disadvantage.

- 1 And that's what the Eleventh Circuit refused to do.
- 2 That's ultimately what the district court did do.
- 3 And I think I disagree with my friend on the
- 4 other side about the burden of proof in this case. It's
- 5 always going to be the railroad's burden of proof to
- 6 show discrimination. And I think the district court
- 7 applied exactly the right formula for determining that.
- 8 Which is -- which is if you're in the zone where you're
- 9 using the railroads' competitors as a comparison class,
- 10 then you're in that area because you're worried about
- 11 whether they're suffering some practical disadvantage
- 12 vis-à-vis their competitors. And so it makes sense only
- 13 to strike down a tax if they actually are suffering some
- 14 real world practical disadvantage and that's something
- 15 that they never showed in this case.
- 16 Ultimately, what the Court should do is it
- 17 should put itself in the position of a state and local
- 18 policy maker who is trying to impose a fair and
- 19 non-discriminatory tax scheme that does not discriminate
- 20 against railroads but does actually require them to pay
- 21 their fair share of taxes.
- 22 I think we proposed two rules in this case
- 23 that would allow that State policy maker, when he or she
- 24 is being lobbied by all sorts of other industry groups
- 25 to get tax exemptions, to figure out whether they can

- 1 give those tax exemptions without also eliminating the
- 2 taxes that a completely separate industry group would
- 3 ultimately pay. And that is that you can use a
- 4 comparison class of general other businesses with a
- 5 focus on whether railroads are being singled out or you
- 6 can say the courts must actually weigh a State's reasons
- 7 for the exemptions in its tax code with a focus on
- 8 whether railroads are being practically disadvantaged.
- 9 Unless the Court has any further
- 10 questions --
- 11 CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Anything you can
- 12 give us on barges?
- 13 MR. BRASHER: Well, I would make one point
- 14 about that and that the only thing in the record is not
- only that they're 1 percent of the market, but that
- 16 specific stipulation that we entered into is about the
- 17 intrastate market, 1 percent of the intrastate market.
- 18 And that's actually where they're taxed.
- 19 So the only thing in the record about
- 20 barges, it doesn't even go to -- to my friend's
- 21 arguments. And once again, they're not asking for the
- 22 same tax treatment as the interstate water carriers. If
- 23 they were, then there would be a lot more litigation on
- 24 that point because those water carriers have an
- 25 exemption that, like I said, taxes when they're moving

1	goods from one place to an Alabama to another but
2	doesn't tax them when they're moving those goods from
3	Alabama to another state.
4	So that's the same ship going from one place
5	in Alabama to another place, paying taxes on its diesel
6	fuel. When the same ship goes from Alabama to somewhere
7	else, it's not. That's not what the railroads ever
8	asked for which is the reason why that issue has not
9	really been litigated in the case.
10	CHIEF JUSTICE ROBERTS: Thank you, counsel.
11	The case is submitted.
12	(Whereupon, at 12:11 p.m., the case in the
13	above-entitled matter was submitted.)
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