Introduction

Since the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in Gilmer v. Interstate/Johnson Lane Corp., 1 increasingly more employers require as a term of employment that the prospective or current employee agree to arbitrate any

dispute, claim, or controversy arising between the employer and employee. Thus, claims of discrimination and retaliation under Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Family Medical Leave Act, and disputes concerning other federal, state, and local employment statutes and common law are increasingly decided by arbitrators. Further, written employment agreements frequently contain arbitration provisions. The selection of the arbitrator is an essential component in the process of creating a fair and impartial forum for the resolution of workplace disputes. In the selection of the arbitrator and throughout the arbitral process, neutral arbitrators are required to make disclosures of information that might raise an appearance of, or an actual conflict of, interest.

Disclosures should be made before the appointment of an arbitrator, and arbitrators generally remain under a continuing obligation to make any disclosures concerning possible conflicts of interest that come to the arbitrator's attention after his or her appointment. Rules and ethics standards vary concerning the extent of such disclosures. For example, the American Arbitration Association's Code of Ethics for Arbitrators in Commercial Disputes requires any person requested to serve as an arbitrator to disclose any direct or indirect financial or personal interest in the outcome of the arbitration, and existing or past financial, business, professional, or personal relationships with any of the parties, prospective witnesses, lawyers, or other arbitrators; they must also disclose any such relationships involving their families or household members. The California Ethics Standards for Neutral

See Walter J. Gershenfeld, The Changing Face of Employment/Workplace Dispute Resolution, 43 Brandeis L.J. 135, 143 (2004) (noting the impact of employment arbitration on unfair-dismissal legislation and calling for increased fairness in proceedings); Christopher B. Kaczmarek, Public Law Deserves Public Justice: Why Public Law Arbitrators Should Be Required to Issue Written, Publishable Opinions, 4 Emp. Rts. & Emp. Pol'y J. 285, 293-94 (2000) (*Employers, faced with a rising number of employment discrimination claims and a corresponding fear of having to pay large jury verdicts to former employees, have responded to the Supreme Court's strong endorsement of arbitration by increasingly making arbitration of employment-related claims a condition of employment.*).
Arbitrators in Contractual Arbitration ("California Standards") are probably the most expansive and far reaching. If an arbitrator fails to make a required disclosure, the California Standards provide for mandatory and automatic disqualification of the arbitrator once a party serves a timely notice of disqualification. Disclosure requirements are expressly mandated by statute. In contrast, other ethics rules allow for discretion in determining whether a prospective arbitrator should be removed.

Despite these ethics standards, the determination of vacatur depends on whether an arbitrator's nondisclosure or allegedly deficient disclosure satisfies the statutory scheme under which an arbitration award is being challenged, which in the United States is most likely the Federal Arbitration Act ("FAA").

This paper examines the disclosure rules and the interpretation of these rules by federal courts and proposes a less onerous standard. The majority of the courts and codes adopt a reasonableness standard to determine whether evident partiality exists that requires disqualification of the arbitrator. One important issue examined is whether the courts uniformly apply the reasonableness standard. Another issue of great concern to the parties engaged in arbitrations and the arbitrators is whether the code requirements are realistic or too onerous and difficult to meet, leading to increased arbitration expenses and delay.

Part I reviews the U.S. Supreme Court's plurality opinion laying a shaky foundation for a disclosure and disqualification standard. Part II places the issue in the context of courts giving great deference to the decisions of arbitrators and the general presumption in favor of upholding arbitration awards where challenged. Part III examines the FAA and federal decisional law interpretation of the "evident partiality" standard first articulated by the Supreme Court in disclosure cases. Part IV reviews how the courts address the arbitrator's lack of knowledge of an undisclosed conflict. Part V reviews the recent changes in disclosure requirements, including the AAA/ABA Code of Ethics for Arbitrators in Commercial Disputes, the California Standards, the Revised Uniform Arbitration Act's treatment of evident partiality, and the National Association of Securities Dealers ("NASD") rules. Part VI critically assesses the various standards and proposes a standard intended to ensure that the arbitral process remains expeditious and efficient in the context of employment arbitration.

I. The Supreme Court's Evident Partiality Standard: "Appearance of Bias" or "Reasonableness"

(2) Any existing or past financial, business, professional, family, social, or other relationships or circumstances that are likely to affect impartiality or might reasonably create an appearance of partiality or bias. Persons requested to serve as arbitrators must disclose any such relationships or circumstances that they have with any party or its counsel, or with any individual whom they have been told will be a witness. They must also disclose any such relationship or circumstances involving members of their families or their current employers, partners, or business associates.

Id.

10 Cal. Ethics Stds., supra note 7, No. 10(a)(1); see also Cal. Civ. Pro. Code §1286.2(a)(6) (West 2006) (noting that if the arbitrator fails to remove himself from the panel, the arbitration award may be vacated); Azteca Constr., Inc. v. ADR Consulting, Inc., 18 Cal. Rptr. 3d 142, 146 (Ct. App. 2004) (referring to the ability of a party to exercise their right to remove a prospective arbitrator, the court noted that "there is no good faith or good cause requirement for the exercise of this right, nor is there a limit on the number of proposed neutrals who may be disqualified in this manner").
12 See, e.g., NASD Manual, supra note 8, R. 10308(d)(1) (noting that when a party objects to an arbitrator's appointment, the NASD Director of Arbitration "shall determine if the arbitrator should be disqualified"). Likewise, the disclosure rule in the NASD Code also specifies that "the Director may remove an arbitrator based on information that is required to be disclosed pursuant to this Rule." Id. R.10312(d)(1) (emphasis added).
14 The author plans to conduct an empirical study to determine whether the code's disclosure requirements lead to increase costs. Here, the question is raised without a definitive statistical answer.
In Commonwealth Coatings Corp. v. Continental Casualty Co., the U.S. Supreme Court in a plurality decision held that an arbitrator's failure to disclose a material relationship with one of the parties constituted "evident partiality" under 9 U.S.C. §10(a)(2), requiring vacatur of the award. Along with its primary concerns about the appearance of bias that might result from such nondisclosure, Justice White, in his concurring opinion, noted that the arbitration process would be best served by requiring early disclosure of any significant dealings between arbitrators and parties. Further, he stated that "the judiciary should minimize its role in arbitration as judge of the arbitrator's impartiality," and a policy of early disclosure would limit the opportunities for "a suspicious or disgruntled party to seize on [an undisclosed relationship] as a pretext for invalidating the award." Justice White also observed that some "undisclosed relationships ... are too insubstantial to warrant vacating an award." He explained, "an arbitrator's business relationships may be diverse indeed, involving more or less remote commercial connections with great numbers of people. He cannot be expected to provide the parties with his complete and unexpurgated business biography."

Addressing section 10(a)(2) of the FAA, the Commonwealth Coatings plurality interpreted "evident partiality" as meaning that an arbitrator "must be unbiased [and] also must avoid even the appearance of bias." In Commonwealth Coatings, a neutral arbitrator failed to disclose that the respondent, a prime contractor, was a "regular customer[ ]" of the arbitrator's engineering consulting business. Despite not having patronized him for a year, their relationship included projects involved in the arbitration proceeding at issue and had, over four or five years, involved fees of up to $12,000. Following a judgment in the prime contractor's favor, the petitioner learned of the undisclosed relationship and subsequently appealed the arbitration award on the ground that the arbitrator's failure to disclose the relationship (as opposed to arbitrator bias) constituted evident partiality.

The Supreme Court reversed the lower court's denial of vacatur, finding that the undisclosed relationship created an impression of bias. Justice Black, writing for the plurality, analogized arbitrators to judges, stating that arbitrators must similarly avoid actions that "reasonably tend to awaken the suspicion that his social or business

---

15 393 U.S. 145 (1968) (plurality opinion).
16 Id. at 147.
17 Id. at 147-48.
18 Id. at 151 (White, J., concurring).
19 Id.
20 Id. at 152.
21 Id. at 151.
22 Id. at 146-50 (plurality opinion).
23 Id. at 146.
24 Id.
25 Id.
26 Id. at 149-50.
27 There is some question as to whether Justice Black wrote for a majority or only a plurality. Justice White, with Justice Marshall, concurred in the opinion and noted: "While I am glad to join my Brother Black's opinion in this case, I desire to make these additional remarks." Id. at 150 (White, J., concurring). Some courts have argued that this "joining" makes Black's opinion a majority and therefore binding authority, while others have held that White's mention of his "additional remarks" clearly indicates a divergent opinion. Compare Schmitz v. Zilveti, 20 F.3d 1043, 1045 (9th Cir. 1994) (stating that Commonwealth Coatings is not a plurality opinion because "Justice White said he joined in the 'majority opinion' but wrote to make 'additional remarks.'") (quoting Commonwealth Coatings, 393 U.S. at 150, 151 n. (White, J., concurring)), and Crow Constr. Co. v. Jeffrey M. Brown Assoc. Inc., 264 F. Supp. 2d 217, 221 (E.D. Pa. 2003) (arguing that the Commonwealth Coatings opinion was not a plurality opinion), with Apperson v. Fleet Carrier Corp., 879 F.2d 1344, 1358 n.19 (6th Cir. 1989) ("In view of Justice White's
relations or friendships[] constitute an element in influencing his judicial conduct.' " 28 Citing to Rule 18 of the American Arbitration Association's Rules and the 33rd Canon of Judicial Ethics (noting them as guiding but not controlling), he opined that "any tribunal permitted by law to try cases and controversies not only must be unbiased but also must avoid even the appearance of bias." 29 While facts did not necessarily indicate improper motives, "a decision should be set aside where there is "the slightest pecuniary interest' on the part of the judge." 30

In his concurrence, Justice White wrote that arbitrators should not be held to the "standards of judicial decorum of Article III judges," because they are "men of affairs, not apart from but of the marketplace." 31 While he agreed that in this instance the arbitrator showed evident partiality, he rejected any automatic [*209] disqualification where such information is either disclosed or "the relationship is trivial." 32 Later courts have indicated that a "material" or "substantial" relationship is necessary to constitute evident partiality requiring vacatur in nondisclosure cases. 33

Because it is generally accepted as a plurality opinion, Commonwealth Coatings has left courts free to reject "evident partiality" as the broad "appearance of bias" standard in favor of (what has been interpreted as) Justice White's more narrow standard requiring disclosure of relationships such that a "reasonable person would … conclude that an arbitrator was partial." 34

II. Arbitration Awards and Disclosure Generally

Recent statutory and standard revisions have sought to clarify what arbitrators must disclose to preclude vacatur of an arbitration award under "evident partiality." These revisions were intended to encourage neutral (and sometimes non-neutral or party-appointed) arbitrators' impartiality, 35 but have diverged on how to review an arbitrator's nondisclosure and on the appropriate remedies for such failures. Nevertheless, these efforts for clarity in disclosure have yet to evidence a drastic change in the courts' opinions, particularly as it relates to neutral arbitrators, who were (theoretically, although not always [*210] in practice) being held to a higher standard of concurrence in Commonwealth Coatings, the plurality's appearance of bias discussion should be considered dicta." (citing Morelite Constr. Corp. v. New York City Dist. Council Carpenters Benefit Funds, 748 F.2d 79, 8284 (2d Cir. 1984)).

28 Commonwealth Coatings, 393 U.S. at 150 (plurality opinion).
29 Id. at 150.
30 Id. at 148 (quoting Tumey v. Ohio, 273 U.S. 510, 524 (1927)).
31 Id. at 150 (White, J., concurring).
32 Id.
34 Morelite Constr. Corp. v. New York City Dist. Council Carpenters Benefit Funds, 748 F.2d 79, 8384 (2d Cir. 1984); see also Montez, 260 F.3d at 982 (noting that courts have had a difficult time defining what constitutes "evident partiality").
disclosure than non-neutrals prior to enactments. California courts have been more aggressive in addressing arbitrators' failure to disclose.

Generally, courts give great deference to the decisions of arbitrators and there is a general presumption in favor of upholding arbitration awards where challenged. Arbitration awards receive "one of the narrowest standards of judicial review in all of American jurisprudence" in order to effectuate the policy behind the FAA, which is to encourage arbitration as a more inexpensive alternative to litigation. This deference is particularly high where parties choose the arbitrators.

The FAA establishes procedures for State and Federal arbitration and provides that any party to arbitration may apply to federal court for an order confirming an arbitration award within one year after an award is made. The court will confirm an award unless it is modified, vacated, or corrected pursuant to the limited reasons enumerated in sections 10 and 11. In particular, section 10(a)(2) "authorizes vacation … where there was evident partiality

---

36 The Supreme Court in Commonwealth Coatings does not expressly indicate whether party-appointed arbitrators are governed by the same standards as neutral arbitrators. See Commonwealth Coatings, 393 U.S. at 14647 (plurality opinion) (stating that the FAA shows Congress' desire "to provide not merely for any arbitration but for an impartial one," but failing to expressly indicate whether Congress' purported policy applies to all arbitrators or only to neutral arbitrators like the particular individual whose conduct was at issue in that case). At least one lower court has discussed the case as if it only applies to neutral arbitrators. See Sphere Drake Ins. Ltd. v. All Am. Life Ins. Co., 307 F.3d 617, 623 (7th Cir. 2002) ("The point of Commonwealth Coatings is that the sort of financial entanglements that would disqualify a judge will cause problems for a neutral under §10(a)(2) unless disclosure is made … .") (emphasis added), aff'd, 103 F. App'x 39 (7th Cir. 2004).


40 See id. (reiterating judicial deference to arbitration decisions); U.S. Sup. Ct. Dig. tit. 26, §2 (LexisNexis 2004) (stating that the purpose of the FAA is to "make arbitration agreements as enforceable as other contracts, but not more so, and to make arbitration procedure, when selected by parties to contract, speedy, and not subject to delay and obstruction in courts" (citing Prima Paint Corp. v. Flood & Conklin Mfg. Co., 388 U.S. 395, 404 n.12 (1967))); see also Alston & Cole-Alston v. UBS Fin. Serv., Inc., No. 04-01798, 2006 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 656, at 4 n.2 (D.D.C. Jan. 2, 2006) (stating that the purpose of arbitration is to provide a less complicated alternative to litigation); Challenger Caribbean Corp. v. Union de Gen. de Trabajadores de Puerto Rico, 903 F.2d 857, 862 (1st Cir. 1990) (stating that the federal government has a policy of settling labor disputes by arbitration rather than litigation); V.I. Nursing Ass'n Bargaining Unit v. Schneider, 668 F.2d 221, 223 (3d Cir. 1981) (same).

41 Delta Mine Holding Co. v. AFC Coal Props., Inc. 280 F.3d 815, 823-24 (8th Cir. 2001) (holding that where parties have agreed to party-appointed arbitrators, awards should be confirmed unless it can be proved that a party's arbitrator's partiality prejudicially affected award).


43 9 U.S.C. §10(a) (2000) reads:

In any of the following cases the United States court in and for the district wherein the award was made may make an order vacating the award upon the application of any party to the arbitration -

(1) where the award was procured by corruption, fraud, or undue means;
… in the arbitrators.' " 44 While courts have treated arbitrator disclosure issues under section 10(a)(2), there is no express provision guiding an arbitrator's failure to disclose relationships or conflicts. 45 Disclosure issues have thus been treated as either manifesting or providing evidence of "evident partiality." 46 Case law generally provides the contours of what constitutes adequate disclosure, even where voluntary ethics codes provide for specific disclosures, to satisfy the statutory requirement of evident partiality. This is a very fact-intensive inquiry. 47

In federal courts, the circuits are split on what constitutes "evident partiality," with some following the Supreme Court's plurality in Commonwealth Coatings in adopting a standard whereby a failure to disclose may be grounds for an arbitration award vacatur where such a failure to disclose creates an appearance or impression of bias. 48 In many circuits, this standard is limited in favor of a more narrow reasonableness standard, 49 requiring "more than a mere appearance of bias" 50 such that an award will be vacated where the fact would lead a reasonable

(2) where there was evident partiality or corruption in the arbitrators, or either of them;
(3) where the arbitrators were guilty of misconduct in refusing to postpone the hearing, upon sufficient cause shown, or in refusing to hear evidence pertinent and material to the controversy; or of any other misbehavior by which the rights of any party have been prejudiced; or
(4) where the arbitrators exceeded their powers, or so imperfectly executed them that a mutual, final, and definite award upon the subject matter submitted was not made.

Id.


45 AT&T v. United Computer Sys., Inc., 7 F.App'x 784, 788 (9th Cir. 2001) ("Failure to disclose information is not a ground for vacating an arbitration award under the FAA."); Lee Korland, What an Arbitrator Should Investigate and Disclose: Proposing a New Test for Evident Partiality Under the Federal Arbitration Act, 53 Case W. Res. L. Rev. 815, 821 (2003) ("The FAA does not provide any standards for arbitrators' conduct. Thus, any requirement that an arbitrator disclose potentially disqualifying conflicts of interest or conduct an investigation to uncover such conflicts stems from case law … ").

46 ANR Coal Co. v. Cogentrix of N.C., Inc., 173 F.3d 493, 499 (4th Cir. 1999) ("The material and relevant facts an arbitrator fails to disclose may demonstrate his "evident partiality" under [the FAA]. However, nondisclosure, even of such facts, has no independent legal significance and does not in itself constitute grounds for vacating an award.").


48 See, e.g., Woods v. Saturn Distrib. Corp., 78 F.3d 424, 427 (9th Cir. 1996) ("In nondisclosure cases, vacatur is appropriate where the arbitrator's failure to disclose information gives the impression of bias in favor of one party."); Olson v. Merrill Lynch, Pierce, Fenner & Smith, Inc., 51 F.3d 157, 159 (8th Cir. 1995) (noting uncertainty among courts of appeals following the Commonwealth Coatings decision).

49 See, e.g., Gianelli Money, 146 F.3d at 1312 (explaining awards may be vacated only when an actual conflict exists or where a failure to disclose offends the reasonable person standard); Lifecare Int'l, Inc. v. CD Med., Inc., 68 F.3d 429, 433 (11th Cir. 1995) (stating that the mere appearance of bias is insufficient to vacate an arbitration award); Morelite Constr. Corp. v. New York City Dist. Council Carpenters Benefit Funds, 748 F.2d 79, 83-84 (2d Cir. 1984) (adopting a reasonable person standard);

Int'l Produce, Inc. v. A/S Rosshavet, 638 F.2d 548, 551 (2d Cir. 1981) (noting that appearance of bias does not necessarily rise to evident partiality).

50 Health Servs. Mgmt. Corp. v. Hughes, 975 F.2d 1253, 1264 (7th Cir. 1992) (citing Florasynth, Inc. v. Pickholz, 750 F.2d 171, 173 (2d Cir. 1984)) (noting that arbitrators often have "interests and relationships that overlap with the matter they are considering" and "the mere appearance of bias that might disqualify judge will not disqualify an arbitrator"); see also Evans Indus., Inc. v. Lexington Ins. Co., No. 01-1546, 2001 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 10419, at 10 (E.D. La. July 12, 2001) (affirming an arbitration award against a challenge of evident partiality where the arbitrator had at one time owned interest in a partnership at issue, including earning commissions (citing Berstein Seawell & Kove v. Bosarge, 813 F.2d 726, 732 (5th Cir. 1987))).
person to conclude that the arbitrator lacked partiality. Some courts find that there is not much distinction between the two standards.

Courts are concerned with arbitrator partiality where there may be an appearance of favoring industry, raising concerns of the credibility and integrity of the arbitration process, and thus providing the impetus for more stringent arbitrator disclosure of relationships and prior dealings between parties and arbitrators. Further, because of an increasingly international commercial market, a push toward greater arbitrator disclosure and transparency places American arbitration standards more in line with international standards. While the codes and standards increase arbitrator responsibility through disclosure standards, most of these codes and federal and state courts tend to adopt objective standard for disclosure, which look at the circumstances surrounding nondisclosure, and hold that a failure to disclose does not per se demand vacatur of an arbitration award. In particular, some courts seem to be highlighting the extent to which the nature of arbitration, as an industry-based practice meant as an alternative to litigation, necessitates a practical approach to disclosure. Nevertheless, one recently revised code goes so far as to require disclosure of potential future conflicts.

Thus, there are conflicting trends. On the one hand is the fear of arbitrator abuse of power, as they are not held to the same standards of judges but yield similar power: arbitrators are not mandated in most cases to publish


52 See Cal. Civ. Proc. Code §1281.85(a) (West 2006); Cal. Assemb. Comm. on Judiciary, Analysis of Sen. Bill No. 475, 2001-2002 Reg. Sess. (Aug. 21, 2001) (stating that the new California Ethics Code was promulgated "to provide [a] basic measure[] of consumer protection with respect to private arbitration, such as minimal ethical standards and remedies for the arbitrator's failure to comply with existing disclosure requirements"); see also Unif. Arbitration Act prefatory note (2000) ("The UAA did not address many issues which arise in modern arbitration cases. The statute provided no guidance as to ... whether arbitrators are required to disclose facts reasonably likely to affect impartiality ... "); American Bar Association, Dispute Resolution Policies, http://www.abanet.org/dispute/webpolicy.html (last visited Feb. 7, 2007) ("Recognizing that the 1977 Code had become unresponsive to current concerns and provided inadequate guidance in numerous respects," the committee convened to redraft that Code.); Order Granting Approval to a Proposed Rule Change Relating to Arbitrator Classification and Disclosure in NASD Arbitrations, 69 Fed. Reg. 21,871 (Apr. 24, 2004) ("The Commission believes that the proposed rule change ... requires that NASD's rules be designed to prevent fraudulent and manipulative acts and practices, to promote just and equitable principles of trade, and, in general, to protect investors and the public interest.").

53 AAA/ABA Code of Ethics, supra note 7, Note on Neutrality (stating that an expectation of neutrality "is essential in arbitrations where the parties, the nature of the dispute, or the enforcement of any resulting award may have international aspects"); see also Alan Scott Rau, The Culture of American Arbitration and the Lessons of ADR, 40 Tex. Int'l L.J. 449, 460 (2005) ("At the urging of the international arbitration bar - for whom American domestic practice was an embarrassing aberration - the AAA and the ABA have recently revised their "Code of Ethics for Arbitrators."").

54 See AAA/ABA Code of Ethics, supra note 7, Canon II.A (requiring disclosure of "any known direct or indirect financial or personal interest in the outcome of the arbitration" as well as of "any known existing or past financial, business, professional or personal relationships which might reasonably affect impartiality or lack of independence in the eyes of any of the parties"). In addition, potential arbitrators are expected to "make a reasonable effort to inform" themselves of any such interests or relationships of which they may happen to be ignorant. Id. Canon II.B.

55 See, e.g., Unif. Arbitration Act §12, cmt. 3 (2000) ("The fundamental standard of Section 12(a) is an objective one: disclosure is required of facts that a reasonable person would consider likely to affect the arbitrator's impartiality in the arbitration proceeding."); AAA/ABA Code of Ethics, supra note 7, Canon II (using a reasonableness standard for disclosure); NASD Manual, supra note 8, R. 10312(d)(3) (using a reasonableness standard when assessing whether to disqualify an arbitrator).

56 Andros Compania Maritima, S.A. v. Marc Rich & Co., A.G., 579 F.2d 691, 701 (2d Cir. 1978) ("The very intimacy of the group from which specialized arbitrators are chosen suggests that the parties can justifiably be held to know at least some kinds of basic information about an arbitrator's personal and business contacts.").

57 See Cal. Ethics Stds., supra note 7, No. 10(b).
opinions, but nevertheless they decide issues of law and fact. On the other hand, as noted in Commonwealth Coatings, "arbitrators cannot sever all their ties with the business world, since they are not expected to get all their income from their work deciding cases ...." The nature of commercial arbitration requires particular knowledge and "often entails the use of arbitrators that are closely connected to the particular industry, and consequently, the parties themselves." This leads many to feel that those within a particular industry may be predisposed to industry awards. The AAA Employment Arbitration Rules require that the neutral arbitrators be experienced in the field of employment law, and many of the arbitrators on the Employment Panel are attorneys in law firms representing either employees or management or previously were in those firms. Since the issues in employment arbitration are frequently complex and involve numerous statutes and common law developments, it is essential that employment arbitrators are experts in this area of the law.

III. FAA and Federal Interpretation of "Evident Partiality" in Disclosure Cases

While an arbitrator's failure to disclose is relevant to an inquiry into arbitrator partiality, it alone is not always sufficient to establish "evident partiality," as set forth in 9 U.S.C. §10(a)(2). Many courts are unwilling to apply a per se rule of vacation where an arbitrator fails to disclose information that a party subsequently objects to as evidencing partiality. Many courts will look to the nature of the nondisclosure to determine evident partiality. See also Gilmer v. Interstate/Johnson Lane Corp., a case in which the plaintiff argued that the procedures generally used in arbitration are suspect because "arbitrators often will not issue written opinions," resulting in a lack of public knowledge of employers' wrongdoings and an inability to obtain meaningful appellate review. The Court did not directly address Gilmer's argument because the specific rules which governed his dispute mandated that a writing be issued and made available to the public. One commentator suggested that the court misread the arbitration rules to require a written "opinion" (providing an explanation of the arbitrator's reasoning for the decision) when, in fact, only a written "award" was required. See Kaczmarek, supra note 2, at 301-03 (arguing that public law arbitrators should be required write opinions and release them). The AAA Employment Arbitration Rules and Mediation Procedures R. 39 (2006) [hereinafter Employment Arbitration Rules] provides that the award will be publicly available with the names of the parties and witnesses redacted, unless the parties agree to include the names. Some state statutes require written decisions. See, e.g., Cal. Civ. Proc. Code §1283.4 (West 2006).

See also Gilmer v. Interstate/Johnson Lane Corp., a case in which the plaintiff argued that the procedures generally used in arbitration are suspect because "arbitrators often will not issue written opinions," resulting in a lack of public knowledge of employers' wrongdoings and an inability to obtain meaningful appellate review. The Court did not directly address Gilmer's argument because the specific rules which governed his dispute mandated that a writing be issued and made available to the public. One commentator suggested that the court misread the arbitration rules to require a written "opinion" (providing an explanation of the arbitrator's reasoning for the decision) when, in fact, only a written "award" was required. See Kaczmarek, supra note 2, at 301-03 (arguing that public law arbitrators should be required write opinions and release them). The AAA Employment Arbitration Rules and Mediation Procedures R. 39 (2006) [hereinafter Employment Arbitration Rules] provides that the award will be publicly available with the names of the parties and witnesses redacted, unless the parties agree to include the names. Some state statutes require written decisions. See, e.g., Cal. Civ. Proc. Code §1283.4 (West 2006).

See also Gilmer v. Interstate/Johnson Lane Corp., a case in which the plaintiff argued that the procedures generally used in arbitration are suspect because "arbitrators often will not issue written opinions," resulting in a lack of public knowledge of employers' wrongdoings and an inability to obtain meaningful appellate review. The Court did not directly address Gilmer's argument because the specific rules which governed his dispute mandated that a writing be issued and made available to the public. One commentator suggested that the court misread the arbitration rules to require a written "opinion" (providing an explanation of the arbitrator's reasoning for the decision) when, in fact, only a written "award" was required. See Kaczmarek, supra note 2, at 301-03 (arguing that public law arbitrators should be required write opinions and release them). The AAA Employment Arbitration Rules and Mediation Procedures R. 39 (2006) [hereinafter Employment Arbitration Rules] provides that the award will be publicly available with the names of the parties and witnesses redacted, unless the parties agree to include the names. Some state statutes require written decisions. See, e.g., Cal. Civ. Proc. Code §1283.4 (West 2006).

58 Commonwealth Coatings Corp. v. Cont'l Cas. Co., 393 U.S. 145, 149 (1968) ("We should, if anything, be even more scrupulous to safeguard the impartiality of arbitrators than judges, since the former have completely free rein ....").

59 Commonwealth Coatings, 393 U.S. at 148-49.


As the [AAA] indicates, one of the "primary advantages" it offers is "industry expertise," with "expert neutrals highly-trained in specific industries." Knowledge of the insurance industry is a reasonable requirement for an arbitrator of insurance disputes. However, experts "highly trained in specific industries" often are or have been involved with those industries rather than consumer groups and may be predisposed to favor the industry or to see disputes from its perspective.

Id. (quoting American Arbitration Association, Focus Area, http://www.adr.org/FocusAreas (last visited Feb. 8, 2007)).


63 See, e.g., Lucent Tech., Inc. v. Tatung Co., 379 F.3d 24, 29 (2d Cir. 2004) (noting that a per se rule would "make the results of arbitration less rather than more certain and would run counter to the general policy of encouraging and supporting arbitration" (citing Gilmer, 500 U.S. at 24-25)); ANR Coal Co. v. Cogentrix of N.C., Inc., 173 F.3d 493, 499 (4th Cir. 1999) (noting that nondisclosure "does not in itself constitute grounds for vacating an award").

64 See, e.g., Consolidation Coal Co. v. Local 1643, United Mine Workers, 48 F.3d 125, 129 (4th Cir. 1995) ("We find it appropriate to apply to this case the evident partiality standard for vacation developed by FAA case law."); Fed. Vending, Inc.
The Eleventh Circuit noted two times when an award will be vacated due to "evident partiality": where there is actual bias or where an arbitrator fails to disclose "information which would lead a reasonable person to believe that a potential conflict exists." Under this standard, "evident partiality" is made out by objective factors requiring a fact-intensive analysis of the information that was not disclosed and its relationship to the parties and the arbitration.

While one court has indicated that the "reasonable appearance of bias" standard is more suited for cases involving neutrals or differing governing rules, other than the FAA, this standard has been applied to cases involving both neutrals and non-neutrals.

It is apparent that, "since the Commonwealth case, the decisions of the circuit courts have not been a model of clarity as to what must be shown to establish evident partiality" and what arbitrators need to disclose to avoid vacatur. In Morelite [*217] Construction Corp. v. New York City District Council Carpenters Benefit Funds, the Second Circuit, "mindful of the trade-off between expertise and impartiality, and cognizant of the voluntary nature of submitting to arbitration," defined evident partiality "as requiring a showing of something more than the mere "appearance of bias' to vacate an arbitration award," yet not necessarily as impossible as "proof of actual bias." There, the petitioner moved to vacate an arbitration award claiming the arbitrator was evidently partial when he failed to disclose the father-son relationship between himself and one of the parties; the son served as the arbitrator of a dispute involving a union where the father was president. The court held that despite a "traditional reluctance to inquire into the merits of an arbitrator's award" such an intimate and undisclosed relationship, 

---

**References**


66. See Int'l Produce, Inc. v. A/S Rosshavet, 638 F.2d 548, 552 (2d Cir. 1980) ("To vacate an arbitration award where nothing more than an appearance of bias is alleged would be "automatically to disqualify the best informed and most capable potential arbitrators.' " (quoting Commonwealth Coatings Corp. v. Cont'l Cas. Co., 393 U.S. 145, 150 (1968) (White, J., concurring))).

67. Sphere Drake Ins. Ltd. v. All Am. Life Ins. Co., 307 F.3d 617, 620 (7th Cir. 2002) ("To the extent that an agreement entitles parties to select interested (even beholden) arbitrators, §10(a)(2) has no role to play.").

68. Consolidation Coal, 48 F.3d at 127, 129 (reversing a district court order to vacate an arbitration award where a party-appointed arbitrator failed to disclose that his brother had been employed by the defendant-union).

69. Evans Indus., Inc. v. Lexington Ins. Co., No. 01-1546, 2001 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 10419, at 9 (E.D. La. July 12, 2001); see also Morelite Constr. Corp. v. New York City Dist. Council Carpenters Benefit Funds, 748 F.2d 79, 82 (2d Cir. 1984) ("Exactly what constitutes "evident partiality' by an arbitrator is a troublesome question."). Lack of clarity on how to define evident partiality has also permeated state courts. See, e.g., Schreifels v. Safeco Ins. Co., 725 P.2d 1022, 1024 (Wash. Ct. App. 1986) (" "Evident partiality,' like obscenity, is an elusive concept: one knows it when one sees it, but it is awfully difficult to define in exact terms.").

70. 748 F.2d 79 (2d Cir. 1984).

71. Id. at 83-84; see also Nationwide Mut. Ins. Co. v. Home Ins. Co., 429 F.3d 640, 645 n.7 (6th Cir. 2006) (accepting the Second Circuit's interpretation of evident partiality "as requiring a showing of something more than the mere "appearance of bias' to vacate an arbitration award, yet not as insurmountable as "proof of actual bias" "). See generally Montez v. Prudential Sec., Inc., 260 F.3d 980, 983 (8th Cir. 2001) (discussing the "absence of a consensus on the meaning" of "evident partiality" evidenced by different approaches adopted by the circuits).

72. Morelite Construction, 748 F.2d at 84.

73. Id. at 81.
where both were involved in the arbitration, would lead "a reasonable person … to conclude that an arbitrator was partial to one party to the arbitration." 74 Family relationships, however, do not per se show evident partiality. 75

[’218] Reasonableness requires more than the appearance of bias with facts that are not remote and which indicate partiality. 76 According to the Fourth Circuit, a court must look at the "nature of the relationship and its connection to the arbitration dispute … ." 77 Factors that assist in this determination include:

(1) Any personal interest, pecuniary or otherwise, the arbitrator has in the proceeding;

(2) The directness of the relationship between the arbitrator and the party he is alleged to favor;

(3) The connection of the relationship to the arbitration; and

(4) The proximity in time between the relationship and the arbitration proceeding. 78

In Consolidation Coal Co. v. Local 1643, United Mine Workers of America, the court did not find evident partiality where the non-prevailing party alleged that the arbitrator's brother worked for the respondent-union. Applying the above factors, the court reasoned that there was no interest on the part of the arbitrator; the brother was not an elected official with the union, had no responsibility for the union's contractual matters, and had not been involved with the union since 1982; likewise, the arbitrator had a history of ruling against the union. 79 Thus, even though the brother had, at one point, lived together and had owned a business with his brother-arbitrator, where a relationship is indirect, lacking a connection to the arbitration at issue, and the arbitrator has nothing to gain, there is no evident partiality. 80

[’219] Moreover, partiality must be "direct, definite, and capable of demonstration, rather than remote, uncertain or speculative." 81 In Nationwide Mutual Insurance Co. v. Home Insurance Co., 82 the court confirmed an arbitration

---

74 Id. at 84.
75 Consolidation Coal Co. v. Local 1643, United Mine Workers, 48 F.3d 125, 130 (4th Cir. 1995) (reversing and remanding an arbitration award where the record did not indicate specific facts that the nature of the relationship between an arbitrator and his brother who worked for the defendant-appellant union was sufficiently direct or had any relationship to the arbitration such that it established evident partiality, and rejecting the district court finding of per se bias on the basis that the relationship was between brothers); see also Fid. Fed. Bank, FSB v. Durga Ma Corp., 386 F.3d 1306, 1310-14 (9th Cir. 2004) (affirming district court order confirming arbitration award and refusing to vacate due to evident partiality despite certain family and business relationships between arbitrator and party); Barnstead v. Ridder, 659 N.E.2d 753, 756 (Mass. App. Ct. 1996) (finding arbitrator's failure to disclose business connections between his family and defendant's family not grounds to vacate award).
76 Id. at 129; see also Peoples Sec. Life Ins. Co. v. Monumental Life Ins. Co., 991 F.2d 141, 146 (4th Cir. 1993) ("The burden of a claimant for vacation of an award due to "evident partiality" is heavy, and the claimant must establish specific facts that indicate improper motives on the part of the arbitrator."); Health Serv. Mgmt. Corp. v. Hughes, 975 F.2d 1253, 1264 (7th Cir. 1992) (finding that a prior business relationship between two people in the same business, without any facts indicating such closeness or intimacy of relationship, insufficient to warrant vacatur as establishing evident partiality); Boll v. Merrill Lynch, Pierce, Fenner & Smith, Inc., No. 04-80031, 2004 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 27948, at 14 (S.D. Fla. June 25, 2004) ("A trivial relationship is not sufficient to warrant vacatur under 9 U.S.C. §10(2)(a), in that by definition, the circumstances surrounding a trivial relationship would be so attenuated that an impression of partiality would not be reasonable.").
77 Consolidation Coal, 48 F.3d at 129.
78 Id. at 130.
79 Id.
80 Id.
81 Id. at 129; see also Ormsbee Dev. Co. v. Grace, 668 F.2d 1140, 1147 (10th Cir. 1982) ("For an award to be set aside, the evidence of bias or interest of an arbitrator must be direct, definite and capable of demonstration rather than remote, uncertain, or speculative.").
award against a charge that the arbitrator was partial under the FAA alleging his failure "to disclose certain business and social relationships with [Home Insurance] and its counsel." 83 Rejecting that nondisclosure per se requires vacatur as well as the "appearance of bias" standard, the court found the facts did not raise evident partiality. The parties' agreement warranted "that the arbitrators come from within the insurance industry" and therefore the parties clearly intended that the panel be "involved in the business of insurance." 84 Citing the Seventh Circuit's decision in Sphere Drake Insurance Ltd. v. All American Life Insurance Co., 85 the court highlighted the nature of arbitration as industry-based, increasing the likelihood that arbitrators, as members of an industry, will come to be "repeat players" and "the panel will contain some actual or potential friends, counselors, or business rivals of the parties. Yet all participants may think the expertise-impartiality tradeoff worthwhile; the Arbitration Act does not fasten on every industry the model of the disinterested generalist judge." 86 While this case dealt specifically with a party-appointed arbitrator, the same standard would apply (at least as a floor) to neutral ["220] arbitrators. 87 The court indicated that even if Jacks, the arbitrator, had been a neutral umpire, it would not have found evident partiality because Jacks disclosed that he had served as Home's arbitrator on matters over twenty years, including as an opposing arbitrator, among other things. Nationwide agreed to continue and later claimed these disclosures deficient but failed to show "how the substance of these disclosures … and his prior and ongoing contacts with Home and [others] … manifest evident partiality" under the FAA. 88

The district court in Evans Industries, Inc. v. Lexington Insurance Co. 89 found any relationship between the umpire and a party-appointed arbitrator too indirect to warrant vacatur under Section 10(a)(2). 90 The arbitrator was unaware of the connection between the defendant and its parent company, AIG, whom the arbitrator used to represent. Even had the arbitrator been aware, the contacts between the parent company and subsidiary were "too indirect to establish anything more than a possible appearance of bias, which the Fifth Circuit has rejected as insufficient to establish evident partiality." 91 The court reiterated the factors indicated above and the general policy that the court "will not lightly overturn an arbitration award for evident partiality," 92 while noting nondisclosure is

82 429 F.3d 640 (6th Cir. 2006).
83 Id. at 644.
84 Id. at 645.
85 307 F.3d 617 (7th Cir. 2002).
86 Id. at 620; see also Nationwide Mutual, 429 F.3d at 647 (adopting the standard in Sphere Drake and Morelite). The Court further highlighted the Sphere Drake court's "cognizance of the practices and norms peculiar to industry arbitration and incorporation [of] these considerations in its analysis" such that disqualification of an arbitrator based on professional dealing would make finding a qualified arbitrator difficult. Id.; see also Dow Coming Corp. v. Safety Nat’l Cas. Corp., 335 F.3d 742, 750 (8th Cir. 2003) ("When the parties agree to arbitration before disinterested persons who have experience in a specialized business or type of problem, the relatively small number of qualified arbitrators may make it common, if not inevitable, that parties will nominate the same arbitrators repeatedly."); Teldata Control, Inc. v. County of Cook, No. 02-7439, 2003 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 6076, at 3 (N.D. Ill. April 14, 2003) ("Section 10(a)(2) does not inexorably require a disinterested arbitrator.").
87 See Nationwide Mutual, 429 F.3d at 645 ("We conclude that the present circumstances do not warrant deviation from Apperson's case-by-case objective inquiry into evident partiality, particularly where, as here, the complaint of evident partiality concerns a party-appointed, as opposed to a neutral, arbitrator.").
88 Id. at 649.
90 See id. at 13-14.
91 Id. at 14 (citing Bernstein Seawell & Kove v. Bosarge, 813 F.2d 726, 732 (5th Cir. 1987)).
92 Id. at 10.
clearly relevant to a determination evident partiality. The Fourth Circuit found that it does not independently justify vacatur. 93

In Ormsbee Development Co. v. Grace, 94 the Tenth Circuit, under the New Mexico Arbitration Act (which mirrors the Federal Arbitration Act in the provisions for award vacation) found no partiality on the part of a neutral arbitrator where he had similar clients to one of the party's firm, because the relationship was too indirect. 95 While he disclosed that he did [*221] consulting work for another corporation, he did not indicate that that corporation was a subsidiary. 96 The court noted that the arbitrator was not financially involved with the parties or their subsidiaries.

A. Courts Highlight Factors Such as Financial Interest, Contemporaneity, and the Nature of a Relationship

As the case law demonstrates, where a potential conflict involves a financial or other interest to the arbitrator, is contemporaneous or close in time to the arbitration and/or exemplifies some significant relationship, courts require vacatur. 98 In Montez v. Prudential Securities, Inc., 99 an employee appealed a final order denying his petition to vacate an arbitration award in favor of the employer claiming that the arbitrator, James Benson, showed evident partiality. 100 In particular, petitioner-employee claimed that Benson's failure to disclose that he was employed with two separate firms, five years ago, that did business with the respondent-employer's attorney's firm, Baker and Botts, warranted vacatur. 101 The Court of Appeals affirmed the district court's determination that the Benson's undisclosed business and professional relationship with the Prudential did not show "evident partiality" where "Benson [did not have] any financial interest related to Baker & Botts," he was neither a shareholder nor had "anything to gain from fostering a relationship," his current employer did not have dealings with the parties, and the relationship "ended five years prior to the arbitration." 102

[*222]

1. Financial Interest Will Generally Constitute "Evident Partiality"

Financial interest or evidence that the arbitrator had anything to gain from the outcome of the arbitration is strong evidence of partiality. 103 "Certainly any time money changes hands directly between an arbitrator and a

93 Id. at 11.
94 668 F.2d 1140 (10th Cir. 1982).
95 See id. at 1151.
96 Id. at 1149-50.
97 Id. at 1151.
98 See, e.g., Sanford Home for Adults v. Local 6, IFHP, 665 F. Supp. 312, 320 (S.D.N.Y. 1987) ("In evaluating the purported bias of an arbitrator, the courts look at: (1) the financial interest the arbitrator has in the proceeding; (2) the directness of the alleged relationship between the arbitrator and a party to the arbitration proceeding; (3) and the timing of the relationship with respect to the arbitration proceeding.").
99 260 F.3d 980 (8th Cir. 2001).
100 Id. at 981.
101 Id. at 982.
102 Id. at 983-84; see also Merit Ins. Co. v. Leatherby Ins. Co., 714 F.2d 673, 680 (7th Cir. 1983) (holding that mere nondisclosure does not warrant vacatur under §10(a)(2) where an arbitrator failed to disclose that he once worked for the plaintiff's president at a different insurance company since "their relationship had ended 14 years before, [the arbitrator] had no possible financial stake in the outcome of the arbitration, and his relationship with [the president] during their period together at Cosmopolitan had been distant and impersonal").
representative of one of the parties involved in a pending arbitration before that arbitrator, disclosure must take place.  

Even where a relationship exists, a court may deny vacatur if there is no pecuniary interest involved.  

2. Temporal Proximity

The relationship between the time of a conflict alleged to affect an arbitrator's partiality and the arbitration at issue is relevant to a determination of evident partiality.  

In Crow Construction Co. v. Jeffrey M. Brown Associates, Inc., an arbitration award by a three AAA-appointed panel of arbitrators was vacated when an arbitrator failed to disclose that she had served as a mediator for the prevailing party only a short time prior to the arbitration at issue, among other nondisclosures.  

There were four nondisclosures in total: (1) respondent's counsel's (Cohen's) appearance before the arbitrators on a previous matter; (2) one arbitrator's role in a case involving the respondent; (3) another arbitrator's failure to disclose his private dealings with the party's counsel as a hired arbitrator; and (4) both arbitrators' failure to disclose their roles in another related matter of respondents.  

On the first issue, the court determined that opposing counsel's appearance in a previous AAA-arbitrated matter before two of the arbitrators was an example of the trivial relationships alluded to by Justice White in his Commonwealth Coatings concurrence and thus did not rise to the level of evident partiality.  

However, citing to the AAA Ethics Code providing a continuing duty to disclose relationships with the parties, although not governing, the court used it "as a benchmark to assess the alleged failed disclosures" and in its determination that the later two nondisclosures amounted to evident partiality.  

The court found that the arbitrators' more extensive undisclosed ties with the respondent and his counsel's firm, Cohen Seglias, suggested bias. The arbitrator's role as a mediator in a case involving respondent occurred near the same time as the arbitration at issue and the other's failure to disclose his private dealings with Cohen Seglias was significant because Cohen Seglias was hired and paid as an arbitrator in 1999. "Most disturbing is the arbitrators' failure to disclose to Crow their role in the JMB/Greenfield arbitration... . It occurred at the conclusion of the JMB/Crow matter, a crucial time in which the arbitrators were presumably making their determinations as to liability and damages."  

3. Business and Law Firm Relationships

Under the reasonable standard, the extent to which a party's previous business ties or other relationships to an arbitrator's firm evidences "evident partiality" differs depending on the facts. An arbitrator's prior non-legal

The arbitration process functions best when an amicable and trusting atmosphere is preserved and there is voluntary compliance with the decree, without need for judicial enforcement. This end is best served by establishing an atmosphere of frankness at the outset, through disclosure by the arbitrator of any financial transactions which he has had or is negotiating with either of the parties.

Id.; see also Montez, 260 F.3d at 984.


Sanford Home for Adults v. Local 6, IFHP, 665 F. Supp. 312, 320-21 (S.D.N.Y. 1987) (denying motion to vacate arbitration award, because arbitrator's relationship with employer's counsel did not reach evident partiality and neither did the relationship since there was no pecuniary interest involved).

See HSMV Corp. v. ADI Ltd., 72 F. Supp. 2d 1122, 1130 (C.D. Cal. 1999) (holding that the arbitrator's failure to disclose his law firm's contemporaneous representation of the Commonwealth of Australia, which owned one of the corporate parties to the arbitration, constituted evident partiality); see also In re First Quality Realty LLC, No. 02-14758, 2006 Bankr. LEXIS 479, at 16 (Bankr. S.D.N.Y. Feb. 17, 2006) (finding an arbitrator's request and acceptance of perks from a law firm representing one of the parties while he was involved in the arbitration sufficient grounds, without disclosure, that the arbitrator was partial under Section 10(a)(2)).


Id. at 224.

Id.

Id. (citing Commonwealth Coatings Corp. v. Cont'l Cas. Co., 393 U.S. 145, 150 (1968) (White, J., concurring)).

Id. at 225.
relationship with a named partner in the firm of an attorney representing a party does not necessarily require vacatur. 112 There needs to be a relationship [*224] with someone involved in the arbitration proceeding and a charge that the arbitrator "stood to benefit from the outcome of the proceeding." 113 "Familiarity due to confluent areas of expertise does not indicate bias. Rather, so long as the previous interactions do not represent part of an ongoing business relationship," such familiarity with an industry more than likely presents an asset in the context of arbitration. 114 In ANR Coal Co. v. Cogentrix of North Carolina, Inc., 115 the court found a relationship between a neutral arbitrator and respondent's counsel's firm to be "nonsubstantial," and thus not warranting vacatur of an arbitration award. 116 The neutral arbitrator was a former member of a firm that had represented one of the parties for a brief period of time during a temporary merger. 117 The petitioner failed to demonstrate "that a reasonable person would have to conclude that an arbitrator was partial to the other party to the arbitration." 118

Vacatur was appropriate in a bankruptcy case where an arbitrator who "regularly went to lunch with one of the [party's] attorneys," was provided with free use of conference rooms and free legal research and was retained to represent a principal of the opposing party during the arbitration in question. 119

In another case, the Eleventh Circuit found that although the arbitrator should have disclosed a prior, personal dispute [*225] with an attorney belonging to firm representing the respondent, nondisclosure of this fact did not create reasonable impression of partiality where the incident did not involve any party to the arbitration hearing and occurred eighteen months prior to arbitration. 120

The Fifth Circuit, sitting en banc, overturned an appellate panel's ruling that found evident partiality based on a dated and limited contact between one of the arbitrators and counsel. 121 The arbitration involved a software licensing dispute. 122 After the award was issued, the losing party examined the arbitrator's professional history and discovered that his prior law firm and the winning party's firm had represented Intel in a large dispute involving

113 Id. at 18; see also Sanford Home for Adults v. Local 6, IFHP, 665 F. Supp. 312, 321-22 (S.D.N.Y. 1987) (rejecting the argument that a prior business relationship between an arbitrator and a party's counsel requires vacation of an arbitration award).
114 Univ. Commons-Urbana, Ltd. v. Universal Constructors Inc., 304 F.3d 1331, 1340 (11th Cir. 2002) (finding that the petitioners made out two separate prima facie cases for vacatur under evident partiality where an arbitrator failed to disclose a concurrent business relationship with one of the parties' lawyer and a meeting with the president of the same party).
115 173 F.3d 493 (4th Cir. 1999).
116 See id. at 499-500.
117 See id. at 496.
118 Id. at 500, 502 (quoting Consolidation Coal Co. v. Local 1643, United Mine Workers, 48 F.3d 125, 129 (4th Cir. 1995)); see also Al-Harbi v. Citibank, N.A., 85 F.3d 680, 682-83 (D.C. Cir. 1996) (refusing to vacate the arbitration award where the arbitrator's former law firm represented respondent Citibank on unrelated matters).
120 See Lifecare Int'l, Inc. v. CD Med., Inc., 68 F.3d 429, 434 (11th Cir. 1995) (citing Int'l Produce, Inc. v. A/S Rosshavet, 638 F.2d 548, 551 n.3 (2d Cir. 1981) ("It does not follow that an arbitrator's personal feelings in favor of or against one attorney would necessarily be transferred to another attorney in the same firm.").
121 See Positive Software Solutions, Inc. v. New Century Mortgage Corp., 476 F.3d 278, 283-84 (5th Cir. 2007), rev'd en banc 436 F.3d 495 (5th Cir. 2006).
122 See id. at 279.
six different litigations in the early 1990s. At least seven firms and thirty-four lawyers represented Intel in that matter, including the arbitrator and counsel for the prevailing party in the litigation. Although their names appeared in the pleadings together, the arbitrator and counsel never spoke to each other or attended the same meetings, hearings, or other proceedings together. The majority of the en banc court concluded that the arbitrator's "failure to disclose a trivial former business relationship does not require vacatur of the award." The majority found this "slender connection" between the arbitrator and counsel to not have met the standard for bias set forth in prior cases, noting that courts in previous cases had refused to vacate where the undisclosed connections were much stronger.

The court reasoned that allowing vacatur in this case would jeopardize the finality of arbitration awards and would provide an incentive for the losing party to scrutinize the arbitrator's background to discover trivial relationships upon which to challenge the award. To warrant vacatur, the court found that the alleged nondisclosure must create "a concrete, not speculative impression of bias." The majority concluded that "arbitration may have flaws, but this is not one of them. The draconian remedy of vacatur is only warranted upon nondisclosure that involves a significant compromising relationship. This case does not come close to meeting this standard."

"Representation of a parent corporation is likely to affect impartiality or may create an appearance of partiality in the lawyer's representation of or dealings with a subsidiary." As well, in HSMV Corp. v. ADI Ltd., the Ninth Circuit found evident partiality where a firm at which an arbitrator was a partner had been representing a parent company in a move to privatize another company, ADI, who was a party in the arbitration proceeding. The relationship at issue commenced prior to the arbitration and continued during the arbitration. Even though ADI's counsel had sent a proposed confidentiality deed for the two parties which indicated that questions should be addressed by an attorney at Blake Dawson, the arbitrator's firm, the court did not find it sufficient to waive the arbitrator's obligation to disclose the relationship.

In Al-Harbi v. Citibank, N.A., the court affirmed a lower court's finding of no evident partiality on a motion to vacate an arbitration award. The parties agreed to Kenneth R. Feinberg as the arbitrator to the claim. After dissatisfaction with the award, Al-Harbi brought an action for vacatur claiming that Feinberg was partial in failing to disclose that his former law firm had represented Citibank on unrelated matters. The court declined to find

---

123 See id. at 280.
124 Id.
125 See id. at 284.
126 Id. at 283.
127 See id. at 284.
128 See id. at 285.
129 Id. at 286.
130 Id.
131 Schmitz v. Zilveti, 20 F.3d 1043, 1049 (9th Cir. 1994).
133 See id. at 1132.
134 See id. at 1124-25, 1132.
136 Id. at 681.
137 See id. at 682.
the relationship warranting vacatur where it was not direct, definite, or a relationship contemporaneous to the arbitration and Feinberg was no longer a member of the firm that had represented Citibank.  

The fact that an arbitrator comes from the same industry does not show evident partiality, even where an arbitrator and a party are rivals. Membership in the same trade association, likewise, is not sufficiently direct or substantial to establish evident partiality.

IV. Arbitrator Lack of Knowledge of Undisclosed Conflict

A. Failure to Investigate

Generally, an award will not be vacated for a mere failure to investigate, unless the undisclosed facts make out "evident partiality." In Al-Harbi, the court found that:

The fact that an arbitrator has not conducted an investigation sufficient to uncover the existence of facts marginally disclosable under the Commonwealth Coatings duty is not sufficient to warrant vacating an arbitration award for evident partiality. That is, we explicitly hold that there is no such duty on an arbitrator to make any such investigation.

[*228]* There are a few courts, however, that have held that the failure to investigate per se requires vacatur. In Schmitz v. Zilveti, the Ninth Circuit held that a lawyer-neutral arbitrator had a duty to investigate his law firm's prior relationship with the corporate parent of a party. Where the arbitrator's law firm represented the parent of one of the corporate parties, but the arbitrator only ran a conflict check for the corporate party, the court found that the arbitrator had constructive knowledge of the conflict and his failure to inform the parties resulted in a reasonable impression of partiality meriting vacatur. Thus, in concomitance to a duty to disclose under Ninth Circuit case law, a neutral arbitrator also has an independent duty to investigate conflicts with parties because, while a lack of knowledge may preclude an actual conflict, "a reasonable impression of partiality can form when an actual conflict of interest exists and the lawyer has constructive knowledge of it." The court also relied on the NASD Code, which requires an arbitrator to investigate potential conflicts.

138 See id. at 682-83; see also Int'l Produce, Inc. v. A/S Rosshavet, 638 F.2d 548, 551-52 (2d Cir. 1981) (denying a motion to vacate an arbitration award under evident partiality where the arbitrator in one dispute was also a non-party witness in another dispute involving the same law firms).

139 See JCI Commc'ns, Inc. v. Int'l Bhd. of Elec. Workers, Local 103, 324 F.3d 42, 51 (1st Cir. 2003) (affirming the district court's confirmation of an arbitration award in the union's favor where the employer was on notice that the arbitration panel would be comprised of industry people and that "some of [its] competitors could be the employer representatives on the panel" but failed to inquire about the arbitrator's background). Similarly, evident partiality requires "more than an amorphous institutional predisposition," Nationwide Mut. Ins. Co. v. Home Ins. Co., 429 F.3d 640, 645 (6th Cir. 2005) (holding that the fact that the arbitrators were all members of the National Grain & Feed Association ("NGFA") was insufficient to establish evident partiality under 9 U.S.C. §10(a) even where Andersons, but not Horton Farms, was a member of NGFA).

140 Norwood Co. v. Bennett Composites, Inc., No. 04-CV-0379, 2004 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 17153, at 3-5, 13 (E.D. Pa. Aug. 24, 2004) (denying vacatur on evident partiality grounds where the arbitrator failed to disclose a relationship between his son and a witness because the relationship was "one that occurs in the normal course of business [between] individuals who are involved in an industry [or] are members of a trade association").

141 Al-Harbi, 85 F.3d at 683.

142 See, e.g., Schmitz v. Zilveti, 20 F.3d 1043, 1045, 1048 (9th Cir. 1994).

143 Id.

144 See id. at 1049.

145 Id. at 1048. But see ANR Coal Co. v. Cogentrix of N.C., Inc., 173 F.3d 493, 499-500 (4th Cir. 1999) ("ANR has failed to cite a single case holding that a failure to disclose in violation of the arbitration rules constitutes an independent basis for vacatur absent proof that, in addition, the nondisclosure proves one of the statutory grounds for vacatur.").
B. Obligation After Conflict Becomes Known to Arbitrator After Non-Disclosure

Arbitrators are under an ongoing obligation to disclose information that might make them partial. The Ninth Circuit has held that an award may be vacated for nondisclosure if those facts create a "reasonable impression of partiality," even where such facts are unknown to the arbitrator. \(^{147}\) Even where an \(^{[*229]}\) arbitrator may believe a relationship to be trivial, "if the law requires the disclosure, no such imputation can arise." \(^{148}\)

Many courts, however, have not taken this harsh stance. \(^{149}\) In Norwood Co. v. Bennett Composites, Inc., \(^{150}\) the Eastern District of Pennsylvania refused to overturn the plaintiff's arbitration award on nondisclosure grounds under section 10(a)(2), where an arbitrator's son and one of the parties were members of the same organization. \(^{151}\) The court addressed whether either the failure of the arbitrator to investigate potential conflicts or, subsequent to discovery of a relationship, the arbitrator's failure to disclose such relationships, demanded vacatur. On the first issue, the court found that as the arbitrator-father was not aware of the relationship until after arbitration began and shortly prior to the decision being rendered, he could not have disclosed it prior to arbitration, but also that an arbitrator is not responsible for disclosing the relationships of third parties. \(^{152}\) Allowing vacatur for mere failure to investigate "would permit vacatur even where the arbitrator had no connections to the parties or the subject of the arbitration." \(^{153}\) And, a failure to investigate would not change \(^{[*230]}\) the fact that there was no relationship "to give rise to evident partiality." \(^{154}\)

---

\(^{146}\) See Schmitz, 20 F.3d at 1049. For the current version of this section, see NASD Manual, supra note 8, R. 10312(b).

\(^{147}\) See Schmitz, 20 F.3d at 1049. The court stated:

*An arbitrator may have a duty to investigate independent of its Commonwealth Coatings duty to disclose. A violation of this independent duty to investigate may result in a failure to disclose that creates a reasonable impression of partiality under Commonwealth Coatings. For instance, the parties can expect a lawyer/arbitrator to investigate and disclose conflicts he has with actual parties to the arbitration.*

Id. at 1048.

\(^{148}\) Id.

\(^{149}\) See, e.g., Gianelli Money Purchase Plan & Trust v. ADM Investor Servs., Inc., 146 F.3d 1309, 1312 (D.C. Cir. 1998); Al-Harbi v. Citibank, N.A., 85 F.3d 680, 682-83 (D.C. Cir. 1996). The court stated in Gianelli Money:

*In Lifecare Int'l, Inc. v. CD Medical, Inc., . . . because there was no evidence that the arbitrator had actual knowledge of the past contacts, we confirmed the arbitration award and rejected the proposition that the arbitrator had a duty to investigate the past contacts to avoid evident partiality. In the present case it was error for the district court to rely on Schmitz, because its holding that an arbitrator's failure to investigate past contacts with one of the parties may constitute "evident partiality" is squarely at odds with the position we took in Lifecare.*

146 F.3d at 1312 (citation omitted).


\(^{151}\) See id., at 8, 14.

\(^{152}\) See id. at 10, 14; see also Team Scandia, Inc. v. Greco, 6 F. Supp. 2d 795, 803 (S.D. Ind. 1998) (dismissing a motion to vacate the arbitration award where the arbitrator disclosed his former legal representation of a third party who was not bound by the arbitration because this was not a disqualifying conflict of interest).


The Eleventh Circuit has held that there is no independent duty to investigate under the FAA where an arbitrator is unaware of the undisclosed facts. In Gianelli Money Purchase Plan & Trust v. ADM Investor Services, Inc., the court held that evident partiality required that an actual conflict exist or "the arbitrator knows of, but fails to disclose, information which would lead a reasonable person to believe that a potential conflict exists." In an attempt to recover money lost from investments, Gianelli filed a claim against ADM with the AAA. After the parties jointly selected an arbitrator, but before the arbitration began, Gianelli discovered that the arbitrator's firm had represented the president of Basic, with whom ADM had contracted to do its trading. After assurances from the arbitrator that he was unaware of that case, he indicated that he had no more disclosures. The arbitration proceeded and the arbitrator found for ADM. Contending that he had discovered that the president of Basic had more frequent contact with the firm than originally stated, Gianelli appealed. The court found that the facts did not indicate any partiality that was "direct, definite and capable of demonstration rather than remote, uncertain and speculative." The court stated that the district court mistakenly relied on Schmitz and found that because the arbitrator had no knowledge of the conflict, there could not be a failure to disclose and therefore no evident partiality. The court looked not to the fact of nondisclosure, but to the nature of that nondisclosure: An arbitrator cannot be guilty of "evident partiality" by reason of past business contacts between his employer and the interested party, absent actual knowledge of real or potential conflict of interest.

V. Recent Changes in Disclosure Requirements

While the FAA provides the basis for the review of an arbitration award, the parties' agreement may provide the rules, usually an agreed upon institutional code or guiding statute, to guide the arbitration and arbitrators. This includes, in particular, standards for arbitrator disclosure. Where there is no agreement, the FAA and the

---

155 See Gianelli Money Purchase Plan & Trust v. ADM Investor Servs., Inc., 146 F.3d 1309, 1312-13 (D.C. Cir. 1998); Lummus Global Amazonas, 256 F. Supp. 2d at 624 n.14 (citing Al-Harbi v. Citibank, N.A., 85 F.3d 680, 682 (D.C. Cir. 1996)). Whether or not an award is vacated does not need to be decided unless "this court first finds that the undisclosed facts show "clear evidence of impropriety,' or, at the very least, a reasonable impression of bias." Lummus Global Amazonas, 256 F. Supp. 2d at 624 n.14.

156 Gianelli Money, 146 F.3d at 1312.

157 Id. at 1310.

158 Id.

159 Id.

160 Id.

161 See id. at 1312-13 (quoting Middlesex Mut. Ins. Co. v. Levine, 675 F.2d 1197, 1202 (11th Cir. 1982)).

162 See id.


165 See Mastrobuono v. Shearson Lehman Hutton, Inc., 514 U.S. 52, 57 (1995) (noting that the FAA does not operate in isolation from the wishes of the parties); ANR Coal, 173 F.3d at 499 ("Determining whether to set aside an arbitration award, a court may only consider whether the complaining party has demonstrated a violation of the governing statute.").

166 See, e.g., Diemaco v. Colt's Mfg. Co., 11 F. Supp. 2d 228, 232 (D. Conn. 1998) ("When parties agree to arbitrate before the AAA and incorporate the Commercial Arbitration Rules [CAR] into their agreement, they are bound by those rules and by the AAA's interpretation.").

167 See U.S. Care, Inc. v. Pioneer Life Ins. Co. of Ill., 244 F. Supp. 2d 1057, 1062 (C.D. Cal. 2002) ("A court cannot require a higher level of impartiality than is provided for by the parties in an arbitration agreement.").
UAA are meant to act as default standards, particularly where there are questions about the vacation of an award due to "evident partiality." Where a party is challenging an arbitrator's failure to disclose, the FAA may preempt a state arbitration act where there is a conflict of substantive law. The language of many state UAA's comports with the FAA as far as federal courts have defined "evident partiality" in the context of disclosure even where also providing for additional language. Unless codified, ethics codes are "voluntary," such as the one promulgated by the American Arbitrators Association and the American Bar Association ("AAA/ABA"). As such, these codes do not have the force of law unless codified by Congress or a state legislature.

A. AAA/ABA Code of Ethics for Arbitrators in Commercial Disputes - A Summary of Changes and Constants

In March 2004, the AAA/ABA adopted the Revised Code of Ethics for Commercial Arbitrators. The revised rules extend a presumption of neutrality to all arbitrators where it was formerly (if not obviously) only applicable to neutral arbitrators. Unless a parties' intent or applicable law dictates otherwise, neutral and non-neutral arbitrators will be presumed neutral. This places the AAA/ABA Code of Ethics more parallel to international arbitration standards. [*233] This presumption-shifting has also been amended in the AAA Commercial Arbitration Rules, specifically Rules 12(b) and 16, which guide party-appointed arbitrators and disclosure, respectively.

168 See, e.g., P.R. Tel. Co. v. U.S. Phone Mfg. Corp., 427 F.3d 21, 31 (1st Cir. 2005) (affirming the district court's finding that the parties of a contract were subject to the FAA because there was no explicit language indicating the parties intent to subject the arbitration award to another standard).

169 See Christopher R. Drahozal, Federal Arbitration Act Preemption, 79 Ind. L.J. 393, 393-95 (2004) (indicating that while there has been little treatment on federal preemption under the Federal Arbitration Act, a "second generation" of cases has begun to emerge).

170 See, e.g., Minn. Stat. §§572.08-572.30 (1951), cited in Lee v. Chica, 983 F.2d 883, 888 n.11 (8th Cir. 1993) ("The UAA contains language similar to FAA Sections 10 and 11. Thus, our conclusions would be the same if we were to apply the UAA here … "); Tenn. Code Ann. §29-5-301 (2005).

171 See, e.g., Mo. Ann. Stat. §435.405, cited in Madden v. Kidder Peabody & Co., 833 S.W.2d 79, 82 n.7 (Mo. Ct. App. 1994) ("The UAA does contain additional language not present in the FAA… . It appears, then, that the UAA has a higher statutory standard than the FAA.").

172 See AAA Arbitrator Disclosure, supra note 7.


175 See AAA/ABA Code of Ethics, supra note 7, Canon VII. The Code also identifies three-member panel arbitrations where predisposition is assumed. They are referred to as "Canon X arbitrators" and, while they still have ethical obligations, they are not presumed neutral. See id. Canon IV.B.

176 See Bruce Meyerson & John M. Townsend, Revised Code of Ethics for Commercial Arbitrators Explained, 59 Disp. Resol. J., Feb.-Apr. 2004, at 10, 12 ("Some parties … are likely to continue to prefer that their party-appointed arbitrators not be neutral.").

177 See AAA/ABA Code of Ethics, supra note 7, Canon IX.A (inferring that parties can opt out of a presumption of neutrality); see also, e.g., Universal Reins. Corp. v. Allstate Ins. Co., 16 F.3d 125, 127 (7th Cir. 1994).

178 See Byrne, supra note 35, at 1825-26; Meyerson & Townsend, supra note 176, at 12 (observing that the concept of neutrality is meant to actuate a greater sense of "independence and impartiality," and placing it on par with a more globally held belief in that all proceedings, arbitrators should be as independent and as impartial as possible); John M. Townsend, Clash and Convergence on Ethical Issues in International Arbitration, 36 U. Miami Inter-Am. L. Rev. 1, 8 (2004) ("As [a presumption of neutrality] is the prevailing international standard, this 180-degree reversal of the presumption of non-neutrality effectively brings American arbitration into line with the international practice.").

The specific disclosures required are the same as the 1977 Ethics Code, just now they also apply to non-neutrals (again, except where Canon X arbitrators are permitted otherwise or the parties agree differently). Some of the relationships within the scope of disclosure include any direct or indirect financial interest in the outcome of the arbitration and relationships that might affect impartiality. The "reasonable effort" standard for arbitrator self-information remained the same.

Potentially relevant is the ABA/AAA decision not to transplant the "Introductory Note" from the 1977 Ethics Codes into the new one. In pertinent part, the Note had suggested that the Code provisions:

Are intended to be applied realistically so that the burden of detailed disclosure does not become so great that it is impractical for persons in the business world to be arbitrators, thereby depriving parties of the services of those who might be best informed and qualified to decide particular types of cases.

The Ethics Code does not mention nondisclosure as a ground for disqualification. Rather, it lists more general concepts such as partiality and lack of good faith, which may incorporate disclosure. Generally, the language of the disclosure section does not indicate mandatory disclosure and the failure to provide an express remedy for a failure to disclose does not provide the revised Ethics Code the force that, even where codified, maybe it was intended. Finally, the Code incorporates a waiver rule that applies to all proceedings adopting AAA procedures.

---

180 Under Rule 12, unless specified that they are to be non-neutral, a party-appointed arbitrator must meet the standards in Rule 17 of impartiality and independence. See id. at R. 12, 17.

181 See AAA/ABA Code of Ethics, supra note 7, Canon II.A(1).

182 See id. Canon II.A(2).

183 See id. Canon II.B.

184 Merit Ins. Co. v. Leatherby Ins. Co., 714 F.2d 673, 678 (7th Cir. 1983) (quoting the former Code's provisions for disclosure as meant to be applied realistically to obviate impracticability). Compare AAA/ABA Code of Ethics, supra note 7, Note on Neutrality.

185 AAA Rules, supra note 179, R. 17.

(a) Any arbitrator shall be impartial and independent and shall perform his or her duties with diligence and in good faith, and shall be subject to disqualification for

(i) partiality or lack of independence,

(ii) inability or refusal to perform his or her duties with diligence and in good faith, and

(iii) any grounds for disqualification provided by applicable law. The parties may agree in writing, however, that arbitrators directly appointed by a party pursuant to Section R-12 shall be nonneutral, in which case such arbitrators need not be impartial or independent and shall not be subject to disqualification for partiality or lack of independence.

(b) Upon objection of a party to the continued service of an arbitrator, or on its own initiative, the AAA shall determine whether the arbitrator should be disqualified under the grounds set out above, and shall inform the parties of its decision, which decision shall be conclusive.

Id.

186 See AAA/ABA Code of Ethics, supra note 7, Canon II.A ("Persons who are requested to serve as arbitrators should, before accepting, disclose ..." (emphasis added)).

187 See AAA Rules, supra note 179, R. 37 ("Any party who proceeds with the arbitration after knowledge that any provision or requirement of these rules has not been complied with and who fails to state an objection in writing shall be deemed to have waived the right to object.").
In one of the only cases to cite the newly revised code, Applied Industrial Materials Corp. v. Ovalar Makine Ticaret Ve Sanayi, the court vacated an arbitration award for the failure of a neutral arbitrator to disclose. The court looked at the parties' Submission Agreement, which provided the terms of disclosure and a waiver provision; specifically that "No arbitrator shall accept an appointment or sit on a Panel, where the arbitrator or the arbitrator's current employer has a direct or indirect interest in the outcome of the arbitration." The court relied on the "broad standards for disclosure" in the Submission Agreement, the AAA/ABA Code of Ethics, and the International Bar Association's Guidelines on Conflicts of Interest in International Arbitration, holding that the award should be vacated due to the neutral arbitrator's nondisclosure. While the award would have likely been vacated under the Supreme Court's standard of "evident partiality," this holding suggests not only a continuing obligation to disclose facts which might create a reasonable impression of bias, but also a continuing obligation to investigate any relationship that is disclosed for potential developments. The court noted:

It is reasonable, considering the Submission Agreement and [the arbitrator's] own disclosure statement, that the parties would rely on [the arbitrator] to continue to provide them with information should there be a relevant change in his relationship or in the event he discovered that he had misstated the facts in his disclosure.

B. California's New Ethics Standard

In response to consumer frustration over mandatory arbitration agreements, the California legislature took action in 2001 to curb what was perceived as arbitrator and arbitration-provider abuses. It enacted section 1286.2(a)(6)(A) of the California Code of Civil Procedure as a solution to the growing "lack of public confidence" in arbitration in consumer contexts. The statute codified the new California Ethics Standards requiring additional and extremely comprehensive arbitrator "disclosures about the relationships between the provider organization and a party or lawyer involved in a consumer arbitration," including disclosures about past service as a dispute resolution neutral for any party or attorney, other interests, relationships and affiliations that may constitute conflicts of interest, as well as "establishment of future professional relationships." If an arbitrator wishes to entertain offers from other professional relationships, such as that of a mediator or other dispute resolution neutral, the arbitrator must disclose to all parties in writing within ten days of nomination that he or she will entertain such offers of employment. A party may then disqualify the arbitrator based on this disclosure. If no disclosure is made, the arbitrator is prohibited from entering into any new dispute resolution relationships with the parties or attorneys while the arbitration is pending.

189 See id. at 28.
190 Id. at 3 (quoting the Submission Agreement submitted by the respondent).
192 See Commonwealth Coatings Corp. v. Cont'l Cas. Co., 393 U.S. 145, 151-52 (1968) (White, J., concurring) ("Where the arbitrator has a substantial interest in a firm which has done more than trivial business with a party, that fact must be disclosed.").
193 Applied Industrial, at 19.
196 Glick, supra note 194, at 122 (citing Cal. Ethics Stds., supra note 7, No. 8).
198 See Cal. Ethics Stds., supra note 7, No. 12(c).
The duty of an arbitrator to make reasonable inquiry into her potential conflicts was expanded as well. Section 9 lays out an obligation for an arbitrator to "inform himself or herself of relationships or other matters involving her or her extended family and former spouse" by inquiring with immediate and extended family members and indicating in writing that he or she did such an inquiry. Further, an arbitrator must "inform himself or herself of relationships with any lawyer associated in the practice of law with the lawyer in the arbitration." The new statutes provide for disclosure of "specific data about arbitrations they have administered within the past five years" and "post the data on an internet website in a computer-searchable format." Broader than disclosure rules promulgated by the NASD and the New York Stock Exchange, the California rules extend to all neutral arbitrators throughout the period of the arbitration.

Most dramatically, the California statute provides for vacating decision when arbitrators don't properly disclose transforming once optional guidelines into a mandate "with consequences for failure to comply." If an arbitrator fails to comply with the statutory Ethics Standards, a party may serve a notice of disqualification. Some of the specific mandatory disclosure requirements include: family relationships with a party or a lawyer in the arbitration, a relationship between a family members and an arbitrator, any service within the last five years in a case involving a party or attorney in the current arbitration, financial interests of the arbitrator or a family member in a party, or anything that "otherwise leads the arbitrator to believe that his or her disqualification will further the interests of justice."

Since state legislation cannot treat arbitration agreement in contracts differently than it treats provisions in contracts as a whole, California sought to avoid preemption under the Federal Arbitration Act by shifting the focus away from arbitration contracts and onto the arbitrators themselves. But, will codes such as California's Ethic Standards pass preemption? In Ovitz v. Schulman, the California Court of Appeal held that the FAA does not preempt the new standards based on the court's "review of the relevant statutory language, the congressional purpose of the FAA, and the parties' arbitration agreement." After submitting to mandatory arbitration, an award was rendered in favor of Ovitz. However, during the arbitration proceeding, the arbitrator, Campbell Lucas, disclosed that he had accepted an offer a few months ago for a future matter with Ovitz's counsel's firm. When the opposing party sought disqualification of Lucas, the AAA refused. In opposition to Ovitz's motion to confirm the

---

199 See Glick, supra note 194, at 123.
200 Cal. Ethics Stds., supra note 7, No. 9(b).
201 Id. No. 9(c).
202 Glick, supra note 194, at 122.
203 See NASD Manual, supra note 8, R. 10312(a); N.Y. Stock Exch., Arbitration Rules, R. 610(a) (2003) ("Each arbitrator shall be required to disclose to the Director of Arbitration any circumstances which might preclude such arbitrator from rendering an objective and impartial determination.").
204 See Cal. Ethics Stds., supra note 7, No. 3(a).
205 Glick, supra note 194, at 121-22 (citing Jay Folberg, Arbitration Ethics - Is California the Future?, 18 Ohio St. J. on Disp. Resol. 343, 346 (2003)).
207 See id. No. 7(d). This includes "the spouse or domestic partner of a lawyer in the arbitration." Id.
208 Id.
210 Drahozal, supra note 169, at 393-95 (citing many states' moves toward adopting the RUAA, focusing on the process of arbitration - which includes extensive disclosure requirements - instead of trying to mandate arbitration).
award, Shulman argued that Lucas’ failure to disclose his business relationship at the time of appointment warranted vacatur under California Ethics Standard 12(b).

Ovitz argued that the FAA preempted the California Ethics Standards, such that an award vacatur is limited to the statutory language of the Act, specifically evident partiality. An example of how California is attempting to avoid preemption by placing [*238] emphasis on an arbitrators duties, the court distinguished between the FAA’s "evident partiality" as a basis for vacatur and the California Ethics Standards requirements for arbitrator disclosure. The court found that the arbitrator did not comply with section 12(b) by failing to note a relevant relationship in his initial disclosure and then failing to disclose after accepting a position in another case, "knowing of the involvement of the law firm representing [one of the parties] in the … arbitration." 212 The issue, therefore, was explicitly about disclosure, not about vacatur. And since the FAA does not contain a provision regarding disclosure (i.e., Congress has not spoken on the issue), there is no conflict of law and, therefore, not a preemption issue.

In response to the new rules, however, provider organizations such as the NASD protested that California could not provide for more stringent standards than those of the Securities Exchange Commission (“SEC”). 213 In response, the NASD and the New York Stock Exchange (“NYSE”) "asked the federal court to exempt them from [the Standards, claiming] there was already extensive federal oversight" and that the FAA preempted the standards. 214 The court denied the NASD and NYSE relief. Two years later, however, the district court in Mayo v. Dean Witter Reynolds, Inc. 215 held that:

Application of the California standards to the NYSE and other self-regulatory organizations is preempted by the Exchange Act and the comprehensive system of federal regulations of the securities industry established pursuant to the Exchange Act. Moreover, at least as they are applied here, the California standards are preempted by §2 of the FAA. 216

In 2005, the Ninth Circuit, in Credit Suisse First Boston Corp. v. Grunwald, 217 held that the California Ethics Standards were preempted by the NASD and NYSE disclosure rules. Also citing congressional intent and jurisdiction, the court affirmed [*239] that the NASD is not bound by California's ethics rules because they were preempted by a provision in the 1934 Securities Exchange Act. 218 Preemption applied because Congress' goal was inhibited by California's ethics rules where it made the SEC responsible for regulating self-regulating organizations; since it would be impossible to comply with both the federal rules and the California rules, the Supremacy Clause mandates that the NASD rules govern. 219 The NASD’s Code does not mandate, but rather allows for removal of an arbitrator if she fails to make a required disclosure; even though an arbitration can be disqualified, parties may opt to prevent such disqualification by "unanimously agreeing that the arbitrator should not be disqualified." 220 And, the battle seems hardly over as the court failed to address whether the FAA also preempted the California rules.

Those in favor of the new standards hold it as more efficient because it places the burden on those affected by the violation, as opposed to a government agency. It also provides for increased transparency with consequences to

212 Id. at 128.
213 See Glick, supra note 194, at 190; Kent, supra note 195, at 903.
214 Glick, supra note 194, at 190 (citing Complaint for Declaratory Relief, Nat'l Ass'n of Sec. Dealers Dispute Resolution, Inc. v. Judicial Council of Cal., 232 F. Supp. 2d 1055 (N.D. Cal. 2002) (No. C-02-3486-SC)).
216 Id. at 1116; see also Jevne v. Superior Court, 6 Cal. Rptr. 3d 542, 553-54 (Ct. App. 2003) (holding that NASD rules preempt the California Standards as a result of a direct conflict regarding arbitrator disqualification provisions).
217 400 F.3d 1119 (9th Cir. 2005).
218 Id. at 1136.
219 Id.
220 Id. at 1134 n.20.
follow for failures to disclose, which give consumers some semblance of legitimacy and provide incentives for
disclosure prior to arbitration. Those in opposition to the new disclosure revisions see formal ethical regulations
as another way that parties will avoid liability by using the standards to overturn otherwise legitimate arbitration
awards.

For now, California's Ethics Standard is the most demanding in the nation, and whether or not the FAA preempts
the standards has yet to be addressed. Caution is essential, as one commentator noted:

The California disclosure rules for neutral arbitrators are complex and unforgiving. Knowing the rules and
complying with them to the letter are essential not only for arbitrators, obviously, but also for the parties and their
counsel. The latter must be aware of what the arbitrator has disclosed and, based on those disclosures, whether
or not they or their opponents may offer the arbitrator additional employment as a neutral while the
arbitration is pending. The consequences of failing to keep track can be significant. In the Ovitz case, even if the
parties were to go through a second arbitration, the $1.9 million award of attorneys' fees and costs in the first
arbitration still would be lost forever.

C. Other States' Disclosure Requirements

1. Revised Uniform Arbitration Act and State Treatment of Evident Partiality

Officially approved in 2000, the Revised Uniform Arbitration Act ("RUAA") was promulgated to provide, where
parties' agreements are silent, "a model for arbitration that was increasingly efficient, streamlined, and ... more
attractive." The Committee wanted to limit "the grounds on which a court may review an arbitrator's award." Notwithstanding concerns of efficiency, the committee understood that the "notion of decision making by
independent neutrals is central to the arbitration process." As of early 2006, the following states have adopted
some version of the RUAA: Alaska, Colorado, Delaware, Hawaii, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, Tennessee, Utah, and

221 Kent, supra note 195, at 922.
222 Id. at 923; see also Glick, supra note 194, at 128 (noting that any non-disclosure "no matter how trivial, has the potential
to become the basis for challenging the enforcement of the award").
is the firm that represented Schulman on appeal.
226 Id.
And currently, at least twelve states and the District of Columbia have adopted or introduced such legislation. Similar to the AAA/ABA Code of Ethics, the RUAA provides that before accepting an appointment, an arbitrator must disclose known facts that could affect his or her impartiality, such as financial or personal interests in the outcome. Lack of this required disclosure may be a ground for vacating an arbitration award. The Drafting Committee was unequivocal about providing an objective standard for disclosure requiring those "facts that a reasonable person would consider likely to affect the arbitrator's impartiality in the arbitration proceeding" to be disclosed. Again, this is similar to the AAA/ABA revised Ethics Codes, as is the ongoing nature of an arbitrator's disclosure obligations.

In adopting the Fourth Circuit's holding in ANR Coal Co., Inc. v. Cogentrix of North Carolina, Inc. that only substantial relationships provide the basis for evident partiality, the Committee altered the requirement to disclose broadly "any" interest, replacing it with the need to disclose "an existing or past" interest with the purpose of having arbitrators "not to include de minimis interests or relationships." The RUAA's vacatur section limits the grounds on which a party could seek vacatur in an attempt to curb vacatur as a means of expressing dissatisfaction with an arbitration result. Addressing the tension that riddles the issue of disclosure in arbitration, the RUAA addresses the conflict between the desire for arbitrator independence and impartiality with the industry-specific nature of arbitration, which demands an experience that

244 See id. §12 cmt. 2.
245 Id. §12(b).
246 173 F.3d 493 (4th Cir. 1999).
247 Id. §12, cmt. 2.

For example, if an arbitrator owned a mutual fund which as part of a large portfolio of investments held some shares of stock in a corporation involved as a party in an arbitration, it might not be reasonable to expect the arbitrator to know of such investment and in any event the investment might be of such an insubstantial nature so as not to reasonably affect the impartiality of the arbitrator.

Id.; see also Beebe Med. Ctr., Inc. v. InSight Health Servs. Corp., 571 A.2d 426, 427 (Del. Ch. 1999) (holding that under the Delaware Uniform Arbitration Act, title 10, section 5714(a)(2), nondisclosure that the attorney representing InSight was also representing the AAA arbitrator in a matter worth over $ 100,000 constituted facts of a substantial relationship to create "reasonable impression of bias" sufficient to vacate an award).

comes with "ties in the business world." 249 To this extent, and in contrast to the AAA/ABA provision, there is no presumption of neutrality for arbitrators generally, only for neutral arbitrators. Under section 12(e) of the RUAA, a neutral arbitrator who fails to disclose "known, direct, and material interest in the outcome of the arbitration proceeding or a known, existing, and substantial relationship with a party is presumed to act with evident partiality under Section 23(a)(2)." 250 There is no per se vacatur for nondisclosure.

Distinctive to the RUAA, where an arbitrator fails to disclose information set forth in the statute, she or he "creates the presumption of vacatur in Section 23(a)(2)." The burden then shifts to the party accused of nondisclosure "to rebut the presumption by showing that the award was not tainted by the non-disclosure or there in fact was no prejudice." 251 The statute provides that where the arbitrator fails to rebut the presumption, the award shall be vacated. Grounds for vacatur may be found in relationships outside those enumerated, so long as there is "a known, direct and material interest" or a "substantial relationship." 252

The states that have adopted some form of the RUAA have consistently retained the objective standard for determining evident partiality, with at least Hawaii and Utah adopting the code verbatim. 253 With exceptions, there have been few cases [*243] under these new statutes (especially as some have gone into effect as recently as this year) addressing the vacatur of arbitration awards due to the failure of an arbitrator to disclosure facts potentially rendering him or her partial.

Where state courts have addressed arbitrator disclosure under their respective RUAA, the results have not differed greatly from federal courts adopting the reasonable standard, with some relying explicitly on federal case law to determine whether an arbitrator's failure to disclose requires vacatur under section 10(a)(2). As indicated above, the inquiries into evident partiality are fact-intensive and require courts to look at the nature of the relationships or conflicts at issue, in particular whether there exists a financial or other interest that is contemporaneous with the arbitration or where there is a relationship that is not trivial. 254

Despite the intent behind the RUAA, 255 the Act has not greatly clarified arbitrator disclosure. In its first case to interpret the revised Nevada Arbitration Act, the Supreme Court of Nevada reversed the district court's vacatur of

250 Unif. Arbitration Act §12(e).
251 Id. §12 cmt. 4.
252 Id. §12 cmt. 4.
254 See Del Piano v. Merrill Lynch, Pierce, Fenner & Smith, Inc., 859 A.2d 742, 743-45, 747-48 (N.J. Super. Ct. App. Div. 2004) (holding, in an arbitration pursuant to the NASD Code of Arbitration Procedure, that an arbitrator's failure to disclose that the company he worked for had been a former co-underwriter with Merrill Lynch following an investigation did not satisfy the standard of evident partiality, particularly because such a relationship has no connection to the arbitration).

Seizing the opportunity to sharpen and clarify, the RUAA Drafting Committee laid out a statutory standard for arbitrator disclosure that places an affirmative, continuing duty on arbitrators to make a reasonable inquiry and to disclose to the parties "any known facts that a reasonable person would consider likely to affect the impartiality of the arbitrator in the arbitration proceeding.

Id. (quoting the Federal Arbitration Act, 9 U.S.C. §12(a)-(b) (2000)).
an arbitration award as the facts failed to establish evident partiality. 256 Adopting a "reasonable impression of partiality" standard, the court held that the arbitrator Matthew Goldberg did not have a duty to disclose his membership on a permanent arbitration panel for the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department, despite [*244] the fact that the plaintiffs brought this case in protest of their termination from the North Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department. 257 Such a membership was not one of the relationships outlined in the revised code comments and did not rise to the level of a "managerial, representational or consultative" level; further, Goldberg had no financial interest at stake in the arbitration. 258

In Bailey v. American General Life and Accident Insurance Co., 259 the court refused to vacate an award on a challenge that a neutral AAA arbitrator failed to sufficiently disclose. The arbitrator, Barbara Moss, provided a disclosure statement, sent it to the parties via the AAA, which indicated that her firm was representing respondent American General in two other matters and a colleague represented American General "from time to time." The AAA indicated that any objections to any disclosure were to be made "on or before January 16, 2002," after which the AAA would make a determination on such objections. 260 Petitioner Bailey did not challenge the disclosure until after the award at which time she claimed that the disclosure should have provided more details. The court found that Bailey had waived any objection to the disclosure because the Rules laid out in the parties' Resolution Plan required that disclosure be made "for comment." 261 Relying on Second Circuit case law, allowing Bailey to challenge the award after an unfavorable award would condone parties making "strategic decisions not to challenge the selection of an arbitrator [but] only to use the same grounds to challenge the award later." 262

Colorado has adopted its version of the UAA (known as the CUAA). Despite rigid guidelines which mirror the FAA, there have been no reported Colorado cases of vacatur based solely on a failure to disclose since the revision. 263 Under its code, there must be a showing of "evident partiality," which has generally [*245] been defined as financial interest; 264 this is consistent with Justice White's concurrence in Commonwealth Coatings.

D. National Association of Securities Dealers 265

The NASD Code of Arbitration Procedure 266 requires that arbitrators "disclose: (1) any direct or indirect financial or personal interest in the outcome of the arbitration; (2) any existing or past financial, business, professional, family, social, or other relationships or circumstances that are likely to affect impartiality or might reasonably create an appearance of partiality or bias." 267 A distinction from other codes in the NASD Code is that "all arbitrators in

257 See id. at 1061-63.
258 See id. at 1070.
260 Id. at 11.
261 Id. at 24-25.
262 Id. at 30.
264 See id.
266 See NASD Manual, supra note 8, R. 10312.
267 Id. R. 10312(a).
securities controversies must qualify as impartial, neutral arbitrators." The Code also requires arbitrators to investigate potential conflicts before and during arbitration. NASD Director also retains authority to disqualify an arbitrator.

[*246] In 2004, the SEC approved revisions to the NASD Code, specifically provisions that dealt with arbitrator disclosure. Similar to the AAA/ABA Code of Ethics and the California Ethics Standards, these revisions were prompted by a perceived lack of confidence in the arbitration process, specifically on the part of investors. To determine the impact of the recently adopted California Ethic Standards on the current conflict disclosure rules of SRO's, the SEC initiated and published the Report to the Securities And Exchange Commission Regarding Arbitrator Conflict Disclosure Requirements in NASD and NYSE Securities Arbitrations (*Perino Report*). The Perino Report provided for the adoption of several new provisions regarding arbitrator disclosure. Nevertheless, the evaluation concluded that the changes implemented in the California Ethics Standard were more costly than effective, particularly as "there is little if any indication that undisclosed conflicts represent a significant problem" in NASD or NYSE (collectively, self-regulating organizations, or SRO's) arbitrations. According to the report, "significant unintended consequences … may reduce investors' perceptions of the fairness of SRO arbitrations."

---


269 See NASD Manual, supra note 8, R. 10312. Rule 10312 states the following:

(d) Removal by Director

(1) The Director may remove an arbitrator based on information that is required to be disclosed pursuant to this Rule.

(2) After the commencement of the earlier of (A) the first pre-hearing conference or (B) the first hearing, the Director may remove an arbitrator based only on information not known to the parties when the arbitrator was selected. The Director's authority under this subparagraph (2) may be exercised only by the Director or the President of NASD Dispute Resolution.

(3) The Director will grant a party's request to disqualify an arbitrator if it is reasonable to infer, based on information known at the time of the request, that the arbitrator is biased, lacks impartiality, or has an interest in the outcome of the arbitration. The interest or bias must be direct, definite, and capable of reasonable demonstration, rather than remote or speculative.

(e) The Director shall inform the parties to an arbitration proceeding of any information disclosed to the Director under this Rule unless either the arbitrator who disclosed the information withdraws voluntarily as soon as the arbitrator learns of any interest, relationship, or circumstances described in paragraph (a) that might preclude the arbitrator from rendering an objective and impartial determination in the proceeding, or the Director removes the arbitrator.

Id.


With the significant influx of additional and often more complex cases resulting from the McMahon decision, numerous issues that previously had only been discussed at SICA (when SRO arbitrations were largely voluntary) were reconsidered (for example: expanded discovery procedures; selection, qualification, background disclosures, training and evaluation of arbitrators; method of transcribing and preserving the record of arbitration hearings; and, the burdens placed upon SROs resulting from the anticipated increase in case loads.

Id.


272 Id. at 3; see also Kent, supra note 195, at 903 n.5 (citing Caroline E. Mayer, Arbitration Standards Challenged, Wash. Post, July 30, 2002, at E01 ("The California rules are so complex that they not only would raise the cost of arbitration but also could reduce the number of arbitrators willing to serve.")))
To address complaints that arbitrators themselves display a bias towards the securities industry, even where contrary to Perino's report indicating little investor lack of confidence, the report did recommend additions that have since been codified. These included: an amendment reinforcing disclosure as mandatory; redefinition of what a public and non-public arbitrator is; and an amended definition of family. The Code now expands the definition of "immediate family member … to include parents, stepparents, children, or stepchildren, as well as any member of the arbitrator's household." As the Code mandates that an investor with a dispute shall be entitled to arbitration with a public arbitrator, the modification in who a public arbitrator is has import for Rule 10308(a)(4) increases the years for an arbitrator to transition from the industry to working as a public arbitrator from three to five. Under the definition of who a public arbitrator is, Rule 10308(a)(5)(A)(ii) bans anyone who has been in the industry for at least twenty years from becoming a public arbitrator.

In Schmitz, discussed previously, as per an agreement between the parties, any dispute was to be arbitrated in accordance with the NASD Code. After a dispute arose between the parties, arbitrators were chosen and disclosure forms were completed in compliance with the NASD ethical code; neither side objected to the chosen arbitrators. After the panel found in favor of the appellees, the appellants learned that one of the arbitrators' law firm had represented the parent company, Prudential Insurance, Inc., of the appellee "in at least nineteen cases during a period of 35 years," with the most recent being twenty-one months prior to the arbitration at issue. The arbitrator, John R. Conrad, while he knew Prudential Insurance, Inc. was the parent company, only ran a check for the appellees' company, Prudential-Bache. Thus, Conrad did not uncover the cases at issue and did not disclose them. The appellants appealed the award in favor of the appellees, claiming that this failure to investigate and disclose constituted evident partiality under the FAA.

---


The data were derived from securities arbitrations involving consumers over a 21-year period (1980-2001). During those years securities industry arbitrators decided 31,001 public customer cases, and 16,294 of those cases (52.56%) resulted in awards for consumers. (Note: Federal court data from the Administrative Office of the United States Courts show plaintiffs in "Stockholders Suits" in 2000 prevailed only 32% of the time).

Furthermore, in a study surveying the responses of NASD investor-participants regarding their perceptions of fairness of SRO arbitrations, the results showed that an overwhelming 93% of the respondents believed their cases were handled fairly and without bias. Also, over 91% of respondents said their arbitrators demonstrated a level of fairness that was classified as excellent or good.

Id.

275 NASD Manual, supra note 8, R. 10312(b). The language of this provision was changed to read that "arbitrators must make a reasonable effort to inform themselves of any interests, relationships or circumstances described" above from "arbitrators should" make such disclosures.


279 Id. at 1044-45.

280 Schmitz v. Zilveti, 20 F.3d 1043, 1044 (9th Cir. 1994).

281 Id. at 1044-45.
The court looked to the NASD Code in determining that neutral arbitrators have an independent duty to investigate potential conflicts. In overturning the district court's ruling that there was no evident partiality, the court adopted the "reasonable impression of partiality" standard for proving evident partiality in nondisclosure cases. The court rejected the district court's contention that there could be no evident partiality where the arbitrator had no duty to investigate and, therefore, no knowledge of the conflict. The Ninth Circuit rejects this, stating, that while such knowledge precludes actual bias, "it does not always prohibit a reasonable impression of partiality." There is an independent duty to investigate, under Sections 23(a) and (b) of the NASD Code, such that where "an actual conflict exists and the lawyer has constructive knowledge of it," it creates a reasonable impression of partiality. The court held that the arbitrator had actual knowledge of the relationship between Prudential-Bache and Prudential Insurance, and therefore he had constructive knowledge of his firm's previous representations of the parent company. His failure to fulfill his duty "under the NASD Code to make a reasonable effort to inform himself of his firm's representation of Prudential-Bache's parent" evidenced evident partiality and warranted vacatur.

Nevertheless, the Eighth Circuit held that a violation of the NASD Code as it relates to disclosure standards, does not demand vacatur in federal court where the FAA is applicable. This reinforces the fact, as articulated in Commonwealth Coatings, that while courts may look to ethics codes for guidance, they are not the law and thus not binding on arbitrators. The NASD Code requires on-going disclosure of relationships (which by definition precludes just an appearance before an arbitrator) with grounds for vacatur of arbitration claims still falling under section 10(a)(2). In quoting University Commons-Urbana v. Universal Constructors, Inc., the court in Boll v. Merrill Lynch, Pierce, Fenner & Smith, Inc. noted that:

The Eleventh Circuit was careful to distinguish between "a large number of [previous encounters between counsel for one of the parties and an arbitrator]" which "at first blush" might seem to imply an inappropriately close association between arbitrator and counsel," but might "simply be the result of the fact that both specialize in [a certain area of the law]" and those "cases where the previous encounters "represent part of an ongoing business relationship." While disclosure would be required in the first instance, no such disclosure would be required in the latter.

Distinguishing the contact outlined in University Commons-Urbana, where a non-party had an undisclosed, substantial financial relationship with an arbitrator, the court rebuked any hint at evident partiality where the

---

282 Id. at 1046, 1048-50 (quoting Middlesex Mut. Ins. Co. v. Levine, 675 F.2d 1197, 1201 (11th Cir. 1982) and adopting its standard).
283 Id. at 1048.
284 Id.
285 Id.
286 Id. at 1049.
287 Montez v. Prudential Sec., Inc., 260 F.3d 980, 984 (8th Cir. 2001).
288 Id. ("[A] federal court cannot vacate an arbitration award based on a failure to disclose merely because an arbitrator failed to comply with NASD rules.").
289 See id. (holding that arbitrator partiality is not established by an arbitrator's undisclosed past associations with the law firm representing one of the parties, dating back five years); Mariner Fin. Group v. Bossley, 79 S.W.3d 30, 30-32, 35 (Tex. 2002) (holding that the arbitrator's failure to disclose that the customer's expert witness had previously testified against him presented factual issues as to his partiality); Katsorsis, supra note 270, at 440 ("After McMahon, the [disclosure] section was expanded to parallel Canon II of the Code of Ethics for Arbitrators in Commercial Disputes (Code of Ethics) by explicitly imposing a duty upon the arbitrator to disclose any potential conflict - an ongoing duty which continues throughout the proceeding.").
291 Id. at 19 (quoting Univ. Commons-Urbana, Ltd. v. Universal Constructors Inc., 304 F.3d 1331, 1339-40 (11th Cir. 2002)).
respondent had no financial or business relationship with either arbitrator at any time before or during the arbitration. 292 The court hinged the Boll decision on the lack of any relationship, which is what the court distinguished from "trivial business relationships" under Commonwealth Coatings. 293

But, even those relationships that seem trivial, and would most likely not constitute evident partiality, are to be disclosed. For instance:

[A] securities professional who attends a Rotary Club luncheon for the purpose of soliciting clients should disclose if he or she then happens to meet one of the parties, parties' representatives, or even another arbitrator on the panel. Although the contact may seem innocuous, the parties have the right to be apprised of the meeting and to judge the partiality of the arbitrator. 294

In Van Pelt v. UBS Financial Services, 295 the court affirmed an arbitration award against a challenge of evident partiality. 296 After receiving disclosure statements by James Edward Banks, one of three NASD-appointed arbitrators, which stated the date his employment at Bank of America ended, defendant-UBS did not request additional information nor object in any respect to his appointment. 297 After the arbitration, UBS "did not lodge any protest or request any additional information regarding Mr. [*251] Banks." 298 After an award in Van Pelt's favor, however, UBS challenged the award claiming that Banks evidenced evident partiality in failing to disclose the circumstances of his retirement from Bank of America; UBS claimed because his retirement was recent, whether he was terminated involuntarily or not could affect his impartiality since the present case was a termination claim. 299 The court disagreed, holding that while the NASD Rules impose an affirmative duty on arbitrators to disclose potential conflicts, the "asserted need to investigate further to see whether the Chairman may have failed to disclose some material circumstance … that would create an appearance of bias is remote, circular, and speculative." 300 Nevertheless, courts have reiterated that "a federal court cannot vacate an arbitration award based on a failure to disclose merely because an arbitrator failed to comply with NASD rules," since section 10(a)(2) controls. 301 And, again, courts are left with similar codes, whether the guiding NASD Code or a codified RUAA, being used with varying degrees to determine whether an arbitrator's nondisclosure constitutes evident partiality.

VI. Proposed Uniform Standard

The courts' case-by-case approach to the Supreme Court's "evident partiality" standard has resulted in inconsistent results for arbitrator (non)disclosure standards. Various codes adopted by such organizations as the ABA/AAA and NASD, and statutory schemes, including the far reaching California statute and the UAA, have attempted to articulate clear requirements and standards for violations. Although each attempt contributed positively to clarifying the requirements, it remains a patchwork of different standards. Further, with the increased disclosure requirements and the myriad disclosure standards emanating from the FAA's "evident partiality" language, the

292 Id. at 21.
293 Id. at 23 n.8.
296 Id. at 12.
297 Id. at 3.
298 Id. at 4.
299 Id. at 7-8.
300 Id. at 8-9.
301 Montez v. Prudential Sec., Inc., 260 F.3d 980, 984 (8th Cir. 2001).
cost and efficiency of the arbitration process is threatened. For example, the California statute's requirement that
an arbitrator investigate possible conflicts (past, present, and future) between the parties and their witnesses and
his or her former spouse is casting the net way beyond the goal of ensuring against actual [*252] bias. After all,
an arbitrator and the former spouse might have had no contact in the twenty years since the divorce, and
conducting an investigation is simply a waste of time.

The proposed standards for disclosure set out below presume that most employment and labor arbitrators know
most other arbitrators in the field or had professional and sometimes personal relationships with members of the
various panels. 302 Most arbitrators are either attorneys, fully knowledgeable of the employment law area through
their current or previous legal practices in employment law, or labor arbitrators (most of whom are attorneys) who
usually serve on a variety of labor panels. Most labor arbitrators know each other from their current or former legal
practices or their previous work as attorneys at the National Labor Relations Board or state labor relations boards.
A number of both employment and labor arbitrators are law school professors whose teaching and scholarship
involve work law. 303 This experience and expertise of the arbitrators is essential in employment arbitration
because it involves a complex area of statutory discrimination issues and a large variety of other statutory and
common law claims. This is especially true with respect to the statutory discrimination claims, which have evolved
primarily through federal court civil rights litigation establishing and expanding on developing theories of
discrimination law as public law. To privatize discrimination claims without a requirement that the arbitrators are
experts in the depth of the law would go against the public policy in the federal discrimination laws to stop or
prevent discrimination that is both harmful to the individual and the society.

In the traditional labor arbitration area, most of the parties are "repeat players," since they are all either the unions
or [*253] employers involved in a collective bargaining relationship. Employment arbitrators on the AAA's
Employment Dispute Resolution Panels certainly know the other arbitrators in their geographic areas because
they meet at training and other programs and serve with many members of the Panel on particular arbitration
panels. Many labor and employment arbitrators work full time in this capacity. And, of course, since most
arbitrators in the employment and labor arbitration field have worked primarily in this area during their professional
work lives, they have contacts with numerous attorneys representing the parties.

Given this reality of frequent contacts between arbitrators and the attorneys representing the parties, and the
important value of ensuring a process that provides for a fair and impartial hearing and award, it is crucial that a
clear and objective, but not onerous disclosure requirement, be utilized. Opposing counsel's appearance in a
previous arbitrated matter before one or more arbitrators on the purported panel or the arbitrators' previous service
with one or more of the arbitrators more than five years ago is an example of the trivial relationships alluded to by
Justice White in his Commonwealth Coatings concurrence and thus should not rise to the level of evident partiality.
304 "Familiarity due to confluent areas of expertise does not indicate bias. Rather, so long as the previous
interactions do not represent part of an ongoing business relationship," such familiarity with an industry more than

---

302 The lead author of this article has served on the AAA Employment Dispute Resolution Panel since its inception in 1996
and attends national meetings of arbitrators, such as the ABA Section on Labor and Employment, ADR Committee's meeting.
He has regular professional contacts with leading members of the National Academy of Arbitrators, who traditionally came from
a background of labor, in contrast to employment arbitration, although many of these arbitrators are on employment panels
today.

303 For example, on the New York area AAA Employment Dispute Resolution Panel, of the approximately twenty-five
members, three are current full time law professors, one a former full time professor, and at least four have served as adjunct
professors.

Coatings Corp. v. Cont'l Cas. Co., 393 U.S. 145, 150 (1969) (White, J., concurring)).
likely presents an asset in the context of arbitration. If any of the arbitrators previously represented any of the parties, including parent corporations, that fact should always be disclosed. Where the arbitrator is no longer working at the firm, however, this fact should mitigate against disqualification.

In examining the proposed disclosure requirements to determine evident partiality, a reasonableness standard should apply, requiring "more than a mere appearance of bias," such that an award will be vacated where the facts would lead a reasonable person to conclude that the arbitrator lacked partiality. The relationship should be material and substantial to constitute evident partiality. As indicated in Part III, while an arbitrator's failure to disclose is relevant to an inquiry into arbitrator partiality, it alone is not always sufficient to establish "evident partiality," as set forth in 9 U.S.C. §10(a)(2). First, the arbitrator should make a reasonable inquiry to determine any disclosable information. Failure to make such an investigation should result in a vacation where an arbitrator fails to disclose information that a party subsequently objects to as evidencing partiality and the objection on its face is material. In other words, where there is actual bias or an arbitrator fails to disclose "information which would lead a reasonable person to believe that a potential conflict exists," then evident partiality is present. Courts should examine the nature of the relationship and its connection to the arbitration dispute, including: (1) personal interest, pecuniary or otherwise, the arbitrator has in the proceeding; (2) the directness of the relationship between the arbitrator and the party he is alleged to favor; (3) the connection of the relationship to the arbitration; and (4) the proximity in time between the relationship and the arbitration proceeding.

The time, nature, and depth of the relationship should be weighed. For example, where a potential conflict involving a financial or other interest to the arbitrator is contemporaneous or close in time to the arbitration and/or exemplify some significant relationship, courts should vacate.

An arbitrator should disclose all material and substantial relationships with any of the arbitrators, the parties, their witnesses, or others that occurred within a five year period. Any time money changes hands directly between an arbitrator and another arbitrator, or a representative of one of the parties involved in a pending arbitration before that arbitrator, disclosure must take place. In addition, arbitrators who have served as arbitrators or mediators involving any of the parties or their representatives outside this period should state, at least in general terms, that the arbitrator served in such a capacity in the past, and should give specifics if there are factors that might demonstrate an actual conflict or bias.

The norm in arbitration should be that there is a strong presumption of neutrality, unless a parties' intent or applicable law dictates otherwise, and neutral and non-neutral arbitrators will be presumed neutral. This places the code of ethics more parallel to international arbitration standards. If an arbitrator entertains offers from any party or their representatives, or forms other professional relationships such as that of a mediator or other dispute resolution neutral, the arbitrator must timely disclose to all parties in writing that he or she will entertain such offers of employment.

305 Univ. Commons-Urbana, Ltd. v. Universal Constructors Inc., 304 F.3d 1331, 1340-43 (11th Cir. 2002) (finding that the petitioners made out two separate prima facie cases for vacatur under evident partiality where an arbitrator failed to disclose a concurrent business relationship with one of the parties' lawyer and a meeting with the president of the same party).

306 See, e.g., Gianelli Money Purchase Plan & Trust v. ADM Investor Servs., Inc., 146 F.3d 1309, 1312-13 (11th Cir. 1998); Lifecare Int'l, Inc. v CD Med. Inc., 68 F.3d 429, 433 (11th Cir. 1995) (stating that the mere appearance of bias is insufficient to vacate an arbitration award); Morelite Constr. Corp. v. New York City Dist. Council Carpenters Benefit Funds, 748 F.2d 79, 84 (2d Cir. 1984); Int'l Produce, Inc. v. A/S Rosshavet, 638 F.2d 548, 551 (2d Cir. 1981).

307 See, e.g., Health Servs. Mgmt. Corp. v. Hughes, 975 F.2d 1253, 1264 (7th Cir. 1992) ("Evident partiality" … means more than a mere appearance of bias …. Often [arbitrators] have interests and relationships that overlap with the matter they are considering as arbitrators. The mere appearance of bias that might disqualify a judge will not disqualify an arbitrator."); Evans Indus., Inc. v. Lexington Ins. Co., No. 01-1546, 2001 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 10419, at 10 (E.D. La. July 12, 2001) (quoting Bernstein Seawell & Kove v. Bosarge, 813 F.2d 726, 732 (5th Cir. 1987) (affirming an arbitration award against a challenge of evident partiality where the arbitrator had at one time owned interest in a partnership at issue, including earning commissions)).

308 Gianelli Money, 146 F.3d at 1312-13.
Conclusion

The courts differ as to what arbitrators should disclose to prevent disqualification of an arbitrator and/or vacatur of an award. Even when the courts agree on the standard, it is applied inconsistently. The recent efforts by various organizations and states to develop codes of conduct and standards have resulted in a patchwork of rules. A disclosure standard should require revelation of actual conflict. In other words, it should preclude actual bias, but "it does not prohibit a reasonable impression of partiality." Arbitrators should disclose fully all their relationships with parties and potential conflicts of interest prior to an arbitration proceeding. The role of the judiciary in determining an arbitrator's impartiality after an award has been made will be significantly reduced, since parties will have an opportunity at the onset of arbitration to reject or accept an arbitrator with full knowledge of his connections with the other party.

It seems to us that the better practice is that arbitrators should disclose fully all their relationships with the parties, whether these ties be of a direct or indirect nature. Although some unnecessary disclosure may result, "if arbitrators err on the side of disclosure, … it will not be difficult for courts to identify those undisclosed relationships which are too insubstantial to warrant vacating an award." 309

Disclosure must occur at every stage of the arbitration, as arbitrators have a continuing duty to disclose, and sometimes a continuing duty to investigate, circumstances or relationships which may provide evidence of evident partiality, whether that be an impression of bias or facts which would lead a reasonable person to believe an arbitrator is biased. Where an arbitrator has completely followed his obligation under rules and terms of the parties' agreement, which she or he believes might disqualify him as impartial arbitrator, an arbitration award cannot be set aside on ground of arbitrator bias.

The codes and the courts should focus on whether the professional and social relationships between all the actors in the arbitral forum, the parties, the arbitrators, and the witnesses, result in evident partiality. A reasonableness standard makes sense and the codes should be reexamined to ensure that the value of full disclosure is not overwhelmed by onerous requirements. The fact that employment and labor arbitrators should be presumed to know each other, and that fact by itself, should not require disqualification.

Copyright (c) 2007 St. John's Law Review Association
St. John's Law Review


310 AAA/ABA Code of Ethics, supra note 7, Canon II.C ("The obligation to disclose interests or relationships described in paragraph A is a continuing duty which requires a person who accepts appointment as an arbitrator to disclose, as soon as practicable, at any stage of the arbitration, any such interests or relationships which may arise, or which are recalled or discovered."); NASD Manual, supra note 8, R. 10312(c) ("The obligation to disclose … is a continuing duty that requires a person who accepts appointment as an arbitrator to disclose, at any stage of the arbitration, any such interests, relationships, or circumstances that arise, or are recalled or discovered."); Unif. Arbitration Act §12(b) (2000) ("An arbitrator has a continuing obligation to disclose to all parties to the agreement to arbitrate and arbitration proceeding and to any other arbitrators any facts that the arbitrator learns after accepting appointment which a reasonable person would consider likely to affect the impartiality of the arbitrator."); Cal. Ethics Stds. supra note 7, at No. 7(e) ("An arbitrator's duty to inform himself or herself of and to disclose matters … is a continuing duty, applying from service of the notice of the arbitrator's proposed nomination or appointment until the conclusion of the arbitration proceeding.").