But See Kohlheim: The Third Circuit Muddies the Water on the Compensability of Employee Meal Periods under the Fair Labor Standards Act in Babcock v. Butler County

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BUT SEE KOHLHEIM: THE THIRD CIRCUIT MUDDIES THE WATER ON THE COMPENSABILITY OF EMPLOYEE MEAL PERIODS UNDER THE FAIR LABOR STANDARDS ACT IN BABCOCK v. BUTLER COUNTY

Abstract: On November 24, 2015, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit, in Babcock v. Butler County, formally adopted the application of the predominant benefit test when determining if the Fair Labor Standards Act requires an hourly employee’s meal period to be compensated. In so doing, the court implicitly concluded that each circuit that previously addressed the issue adopted the predominant benefit test. This Comment argues that the Third Circuit mischaracterized the status of the law on which test the circuit courts apply by overlooking the Eleventh Circuit’s application of the relieved from all duties test.

INTRODUCTION

Congress enacted the Fair Labor Standards Act (“FLSA”) in 1938 in an effort to ensure and maintain the “general well-being” of workers in the United States. As part of this effort, the overtime-pay provision of the FLSA requires an employee working more than forty hours in a week to be paid at least one and one-half times his or her regular rate of pay for the time exceeding forty hours.

Disputes surrounding the administration and interpretation of the overtime-pay provision followed closely on the heels of the FLSA’s enactment.  


3 See, e.g., Black Mountain Corp. v. Adkins, 133 S.W.2d 900, 900–01 (Ky. 1939) (addressing whether increased wages resulting from an employee’s disability pay nullified § 207(a)(1), the overtime-pay provision); Gurtov v. Volk, 11 N.Y.S.2d 604, 605–06 (Mun. Ct. 1939) (addressing whether or not an increase in an employee’s base pay was sufficient to satisfy the overtime pay
One such dispute concerned whether or not the time included in an employee’s meal period counts toward the forty-hour workweek. The FLSA itself makes no mention of whether or not an employee’s meal period is compensable under the act.

In 1961, in an effort to clarify and more efficiently administer certain provisions of the FLSA, including the overtime-pay provision, the U.S. Department of Labor (“DOL”) promulgated a number of interpretive regulations. Included among these regulations is 29 C.F.R. § 785.19, which provides that the time accrued during an employee’s meal period is not compensable under the FLSA if the meal period constitutes a “bona fide” meal period as the term is defined in the regulation. Courts regularly construe § 785.19 as merely instructive, however, and consistently look beyond the plain meaning of its definition of a bona fide meal period in favor of their own interpretations.

The method by which courts determine whether or not a meal period is bona fide under § 785.19 turns on a court’s application of one of two tests: (1)
the relieved from all duties test or (2) the predominant benefit test. Both tests evaluate the nature of the work responsibilities that an employee owes to the employer during his or her meal period. The overwhelming majority of U.S. Courts of Appeals have adopted the predominant benefit test. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit remains the only jurisdiction to definitively apply the relieved from all duties test in any context. In November 2015, in Babcock v. Butler County ("Babcock II"), the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit became the most recent jurisdiction to formally adopt the predominant benefit test. In doing so, the court joined the Second, Fourth, Fifth, Sixth, Seventh, Eighth, and Tenth circuits.

This Comment argues that the Third Circuit, in Babcock II, mischaracterized the status of the law on the compensability of meal periods under the FLSA when it concluded that the Eleventh Circuit does not apply the relieved from all duties test. Part I of this Comment examines the standards and underlying reasoning of the two tests and discusses the factual and procedural history of Babcock II. Part II discusses the Third Circuit’s treatment of relevant Eleventh Circuit precedent and examines the reasoning behind the court’s interpretations of two pertinent Eleventh Circuit holdings. Finally, Part III argues that the court misinterpreted this precedent

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10 See Babcock II, 806 F.3d at 155 (describing what the tests “look[]” at when they are applied).

11 See id. at 156 (listing circuits that have adopted the test); see also Bernard v. IBP, Inc. of Neb., 154 F.3d 259, 264 n.16 (5th Cir. 1998) (adopting the predominant benefit test); Roy v. Cty. of Lexington, 141 F.3d 533, 545 (4th Cir. 1998) (same); Reich, 121 F.3d at 64 (same); Henson v. Pulaski Cty. Sheriff Dep’t, 6 F.3d 531, 534 (8th Cir. 1993) (same); Alexander v. City of Chicago, 994 F.2d 333, 339 (7th Cir. 1993) (same); Lamon v. City of Shawnee, 972 F.2d 1145, 1157 (10th Cir. 1992) (same); Hill v. United States, 751 F.2d 810, 814 (6th Cir. 1984) (same).

12 Kohlheim v. Glynn Cty., 915 F.2d 1473, 1477 (11th Cir. 1990) (holding that an employee’s meal period is compensable under § 785.19 when an employee is relieved of their work duties during the meal period); see also Chao v. Tyson Foods, Inc., 568 F. Supp. 2d 1300, 1307 n.4 (N.D. Ala. 2008) (noting that the Eleventh Circuit applies the relieved from all duties standard when interpreting § 785.19). The First, Ninth, and D.C. circuits have yet to formally adopt either test. See O’Hara v. Menino, 253 F. Supp. 2d 147, 155 (D. Mass. 2003) (applying the predominant benefit test and acknowledging that the First Circuit had yet to officially adopt either test); Daniel Wiessner, 3rd Circuit Adopts “Predominant Benefit” Test for Meal Break Lawsuits, 30 No. 11 WESTLAW J. EMP. 4, Dec. 22, 2015, at *1 (noting that the First Circuit, Ninth Circuit, and D.C. Circuit have not adopted either test).

13 Babcock II, 806 F.3d at 156.

14 Id.; see supra note 11 and accompanying text (listing circuits that have adopted the predominant benefit test).

15 See infra notes 73–92 and accompanying text.

16 See infra notes 25–50 and accompanying text.

17 See infra notes 56–69 and accompanying text.
and that there remains a circuit split on which test to apply when determining whether or not a meal period is bona fide under § 785.19.\(^ {18} \)

I. WEIGHING THE OPTIONS: THE THIRD CIRCUIT HAS ITS SAY ON THE COMPENSABILITY OF MEAL PERIODS UNDER THE FLSA

Prior to the Babcock II ruling, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit had yet to address the compensability of employee meal periods under the FLSA.\(^ {19} \) The decision in Babcock II turned on whether or not the meal periods of the appellants were bona fide under § 785.19.\(^ {20} \) If they were bona fide, the meal periods would not count as worktime and thus would not implicate the FLSA’s overtime-pay provision.\(^ {21} \) To make this determination, the Third Circuit formally adopted and applied the predominant benefit test.\(^ {22} \) Section A of this Part examines the standards and underlying reasoning of the two tests.\(^ {23} \) Section B discusses the factual and procedural history of Babcock II, wherein the Third Circuit formally adopted the predominant benefit test.\(^ {24} \)

A. The Tests

Under the relieved from all duties test, a meal period is bona fide if the employee is completely relieved of all of his or her duties during the meal period.\(^ {25} \) The application of the relieved from all duties test derives from

\(^{18}\) See infra notes 73–92 and accompanying text.

\(^{19}\) Babcock II, 806 F.3d at 155.

\(^{20}\) See id. at 156–57 (discussing § 785.19(a) and applying the predominant benefit test); 29 C.F.R. § 785.19(a) (“Bona fide meal periods are not worktime.”).

\(^{21}\) See Babcock II, 806 F.3d at 156–57 (analyzing whether the nature of the corrections officers’ duties during their meal periods required them to be compensated). Under the corrections officers’ collectively bargained compensation scheme, no employee would exceed forty hours of compensated worktime per week. See id. at 155 (describing the parties’ collectively bargained compensation scheme). Were the entirety of their meal periods deemed compensable, however, they would have been entitled to overtime pay. See id. (explaining that only forty-five minutes of each one-hour meal period was compensated).

\(^{22}\) See id. at 156 (adopting and applying the predominant benefit test).

\(^{23}\) See infra notes 25–35 and accompanying text.

\(^{24}\) See infra notes 36–50 and accompanying text.

\(^{25}\) See 29 C.F.R. § 785.19(a) (requiring that an employee be “completely relieved from duty” during a bona fide meal period); see also Summers v. Howard Univ., 127 F. Supp. 2d 27, 33 (D.D.C. 2000) (concluding that the relieved from all duties test follows the literal language of § 785.19); Abendschein v. Montgomery Cty., 984 F. Supp. 356, 361 (D. Md. 1997) (concluding that the relieved from all duties test relies on the literal language of § 785.19). Section 785.19 provides several illustrations of when an employee is, in fact, relieved from all duties and thus when his or her meal period is bona fide. § 785.19(a). For example, the regulation advises that an office employee who is required to eat at his or her desk while performing work related tasks would not be considered to be completely relieved of all of his or her duties and thus his or her meal period would not be bona fide under the regulation. Id. The DOL still instructs that an em-
Third Circuit Adopts Predominant Benefit Test But Muddies Meal Period Split

both Tenth Circuit and U.S. Supreme Court precedent, which encourages lower courts to grant a measure of deference to the guidance set forth by the DOL regulations.26 According to this precedent, such regulations constitute strong persuasive authority that should be followed absent a legitimate reason to cast them aside.27 The application of the relieved from all duties test therefore stays true to that sentiment by directly tracking the plain meaning of § 785.19’s language.28

Conversely, the predominant benefit test looks outside the plain meaning of the regulation’s language and evaluates which party receives the predominant benefit of the meal period: the employer or the employee.29 If the employee receives the predominant benefit, the meal period is bona fide and the time will not count as worktime.30 The predominant benefit test is derived from the U.S. Supreme Court’s construction of the term “work,” as used in the FLSA, in its 1944 opinion in Tennessee Coal, Iron & Railroad Co. v. Muscoda Local No. 123.31 In Tennessee Coal, the Court construed the

employee’s meal period must be compensated unless the employee is completely relieved of all of his or her duties during the meal period. See U.S. DEP’T OF LABOR, WAGE & HOUR DIV., FACT SHEET #22: HOURS WORKED UNDER THE FAIR LABOR STANDARDS ACT (2008), https://www.dol.gov/whd/regs/compliance/whdfs22.htm [https://perma.cc/RF5W-TMC9] (noting the standard for a compensable meal period).

26 See Babcock II, 806 F.3d at 157 n.7 (citing Skidmore v. Swift, 323 U.S. 134, 140 (1944)) (noting that DOL regulations are a source of “guidance” for parties); Kohlheim, 915 F.2d at 1477 n.20 (citing Mitchell v. Greinetz, 235 F. 2d 621, 625 (10th Cir. 1956)) (noting that courts should not be too quick to dismiss the guidance of the DOL’s regulations).

27 See Kohlheim, 915 F.2d at 1477 n.20 (citing Skidmore, 323 U.S. at 140 and Mitchell, 235 F. 2d at 625).

28 See Summers, 127 F. Supp. 2d at 33 (concluding that the relieved from all duties test follows the literal language of § 785.19); 29 C.F.R. § 785.19 (“The employee must be completely relieved from duty . . . .”).

29 See Babcock II, 806 F.3d at 156–57; Avery v. City of Talladega, 24 F.3d 1337, 1346 (11th Cir. 1994) (noting that the employer may receive the predominant benefit of the meal period if the employee’s meal period is limited by the imposition of work duties); Alexander, 994 F.2d at 339 (noting that an employer typically receives the predominant benefit of a meal period when the imposition of work responsibilities or duties disrupts the employee’s meal period such that the employee is “unable to pass the mealtime comfortably”).

30 See Babcock II, 806 F.3d at 158 (holding that employee meal periods were not compensable under the FLSA because the employees did not receive the predominant benefit of their meal periods); see also Lawrence E. Henke, Comment, Is the Fair Labor Standards Act Really Fair? Government Abuse or Financial Necessity: An Analysis of the Fair Labor Standards Act 1974 Amendment—the § 207(k) Exemption, 52 SMU L. REV. 1847, 1865 (1999) (describing the predominant benefit test). The rationale that courts have typically proffered in support of interpreting § 785.19 to require an application of the predominant benefit test is most soundly set forth in the Second Circuit’s opinion in Reich v. Southern New England Telecommunications Corp. See 121 F.3d at 64–65 (describing Supreme Court precedent as the basis for the creation of the predominant benefit test); see also Henson, 6 F.3d at 534 (describing the reasoning behind the application of the predominant benefit test).

31 See Tenn. Coal, Iron & R.R. Co. v. Muscoda Local No. 123, 321 U.S. 590, 598 (1944) (defining work as “physical or mental exertion (whether burdensome or not) controlled or required
FLSA’s use of the term “work” to encompass activities required by an employer that are carried out predominantly for the benefit of the employer.\(^3\) Thus, lower courts have reasoned that if the time spent during a meal period does not predominantly benefit the employer, it cannot properly be considered “work” as that term is understood under the FLSA and is not be compensable.\(^3\)

The predominant benefit test can accurately be said to be more employer-friendly because it allows the employer to impose uncompensated work responsibilities on an employee during his or her meal period as long as the employee ultimately enjoys the predominant benefit of the meal period.\(^3\) Conversely, the relieved from all duties test grants more rights to em-

\(^3\) See Integrity Staffing, 135 S. Ct. at 516 (acknowledging that the decision in Tennessee Coal, Iron & Railroad Co. v. Muscoda Local No. 123 was issued in response to the fact that Congress did not define the term “work” in the FLSA); Reich, 121 F.3d at 64 (describing the Tennessee Coal decision); see also Victor M. Velarde, Comment, On the Construction of Section 203(o) of the FLSA: Exclusion Without Exemption, 21 U. MIAMI BUS. L. REV. 253, 256 (2013) (describing the Tennessee Coal holding). Subsequent to the Tennessee Coal decision, the U.S. Supreme Court held that determinations of work are necessarily fact-bound inquiries. See Reich, 121 F.3d at 64 (citing Armour & Co. v. Wantock, 32 U.S. 126, 133 (1944)). Recognizing the disputes surrounding what exactly constitutes work, Congress passed the Portal-to-Portal Act in 1947 to categorically preclude employees from claiming that time spent “walking, riding, or travelling” to their place of work or activities “preliminary to or postliminary to” their “principal . . . activities” constitutes work. 29 U.S.C. § 254(a) (2012); see Integrity Staffing, 135 S. Ct. at 516 (describing the history of the Portal-to-Portal Act).

\(^3\) See Reich, 121 F.3d at 64 (“The central issue in mealtime cases is whether the employees are required to ‘work’ as that term is understood under the FLSA.”). The argument in favor of the predominant benefit test over the relieved from all duties test when interpreting § 785.19 is further supported by the existence of opinion letters issued by DOL representatives in the 1980s that suggest the Secretary of Labor’s desire for the courts to apply a “broad” and “flexible” interpretation of § 785.19. See id. (citing U.S. Dep’t of Labor, Wage & Hour Div., Opinion Letter (Aug. 25, 1980)) (discussing opinion letters that advised a literal reading of § 785.19 would require certain types of employees to be compensated “24 hours [a] day”).

\(^3\) See Henson, 6 F.3d at 534 (describing the relieved from all duties test as “unrealistic” because it would require compensation even if the employee merely “remain[ed] on-call”). The practical implications of one test over the other on employers and employees alike was evident following the issuance of the 2015 Babcock II opinion, as law firms and employment blogs across the country raced to provide analysis on what the ruling meant for employers and employees. See, e.g., Nicole L. Leitner, Third Circuit Adopts New Test for Determining Whether Meal Breaks Are Compensable, LABOR & EMP. L. BLOG (Dec. 1, 2015), http://www.labor-law-blog.com/wage-and-hour-flsa/third-circuit-adopts-new-test-for-determining-whether-meal-breaks-are-compensable [https://perma.cc/344A-322G] (suggesting the employers should remain vigilant on whether the meal periods offered to their employees are in line with the Babcock II ruling); Adam R. Long, When Must Meal Breaks Be Paid? Third Circuit Clarifies FLSA Test, PA. LABOR & EMP. BLOG (Dec. 1, 2015), http://www.palaborandemploymentblog.com/2015/12/articles/wage-hour/mealbreaks/ [https://perma.cc/AUQ3-D3JR] (advising that employers should take note of the Babcock II ruling because a failure to follow the meal break requirements under the FLSA could expose them to liability); David Treibman, Third Circuit: Meal Breaks for Employees’ “Predominant Benefit” Are Not Worktime, WAGE & HOUR LS.
ployees, as the imposition of work responsibilities during an employee’s meal period would require the entirety of the meal period to be compensated.  

B. Babcock v. Butler County: The Third Circuit Adopts the Predominant Benefit Test

On March 29, 2012, Sandra Babcock, a corrections officer at Butler County Prison in Butler, Pennsylvania, initiated a putative class action suit against her employer in the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Pennsylvania. The complaint alleged that Butler County Prison ("Butler County") violated the FLSA by improperly failing to compensate the plaintiffs for the entirety of their meal periods.  

Under the parties’ collective bargaining agreement (“CBA”), the corrections officers were required to work eight and one-quarter hours during each shift. These shifts included a one hour meal period. Butler County, however, only compensated forty-five minutes of the one hour meal peri-

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35 See Kevin McGowan, Unpaid Meal Time Not Covered by FLSA, 3rd Cir. Affirms, BLOOMBERG BNA: DAILY LABOR REP. (Nov. 25, 2015), http://www.bna.com/unpaid-meal-time-n57982063954/ [https://perma.cc/DCU3-AV6C] (suggesting the relieved from all duties test is more “employee-friendly”). In adopting the predominant benefit test, the Eighth Circuit in Henson v. Pulaski County Sheriff Department specifically rejected the relieved from all duties test over concerns that its application would hamstring employers. See Henson, 6 F.3d at 534 (holding that it is “unrealistic” for employers to be responsible). The court expressed reservations over the broad scope of plaintiffs that an adoption of the relieved from all duties test would seem to allow for. See id. In the court’s view, the test was “unrealistic,” as it would force employers to compensate the meal period of any employee who had even a minimal level of responsibility during his or her meal period. See id.

36 Babcock II, 806 F.3d at 155; see Babcock v. Butler Cty. (Babcock I), No. 12CV394, 2014 WL 688122, *2 (W.D. Pa. Feb. 21, 2014). The lawsuit took a number of years to reach court, as the corrections officers’ complaint was originally dismissed in 2012 because of a jurisdictional issue emanating from the parties’ collective bargaining agreement. Babcock I, 2014 WL 688122, at *2. The court stayed the case while the parties worked through arbitration but eventually reopened it in January 2014 after the corrections officers filed an unopposed motion to reopen the case. Id.

37 Babcock I, 2014 WL 688122, at *1, 3; Complaint at 6–7, ¶¶ 41–48, Babcock I, 2014 WL 688122 (No. 12CV394) (alleging that Butler County Prison (“Butler County”) violated the FLSA by failing to pay plaintiffs overtime compensation).

38 Babcock II, 806 F.3d at 155.

39 Id.
The corrections officers challenged the legality of the uncompensated fifteen minutes under the overtime-pay provision of the FLSA and contended that the full hour should have been compensated. In support of their claim, the corrections officers alleged that, during their meal periods, they were not allowed to leave the prison without permission and were required to remain on-call, in-uniform, and in close proximity to emergency response equipment. The corrections officers argued that these facts proved that their meal periods were not bona fide under § 785.19 and that Butler County was in violation of the FLSA for not compensating the entirety of the meal periods.

Butler County moved to dismiss the suit in February 2014, arguing that, under the predominant benefit test, the corrections officers received the predominant benefit of the meal periods and therefore Butler County was not required to compensate them for the full hour. The district court agreed and dismissed the suit. The corrections officers appealed the dismissal to the Third Circuit.

Prior to its decision in Babcock II, the Third Circuit had yet to adopt either the relieved from all duties test or the predominant benefit test when making a determination on whether a meal period was bona fide under § 785.19. Confident that the allegations within their complaint were sufficient to satisfy either test and thus survive Butler County’s motion to dismiss, the corrections officers did not implore the court to apply one test over the other. Following the trend among its sister circuits, the Third Circuit adopt-
ed the predominant benefit test. After applying the test, the Third Circuit
affirmed the district court’s decision and held that the corrections officers re-
tained the predominant benefit of their meal periods and thus the full hour of
their meal periods were not required to be compensated under the FLSA.

II. UNANIMITY AMONG THE CIRCUITS?: THE THIRD CIRCUIT CONCLUDES
THAT THE ELEVENTH CIRCUIT APPLIES THE PREDOMINANT BENEFIT TEST

In dismissing the corrections officers’ claims in 2015 in Babcock v. Butler County (‘‘Babcock II’’), the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Cir-
cuit formally adopted the predominant benefit test. Prior to doing so, the
court summarized the status of the law across the circuits and concluded
that there was not a circuit split on the appropriate test for determining
whether a meal period is bona fide under § 785.19. Included in this sum-
mary was reference to and discussion of Eleventh Circuit precedent on the
issue. Section A of this Part examines the Third Circuit’s discussion and
interpretation of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit’s 1990
holding in Kohlheim v. Glynn County. Section B of this Part examines the
Third Circuit’s citation to the Eleventh Circuit’s 1994 opinion in Avery v.
City of Talladega.
A. Did They or Didn’t They?: Kohlheim and the Application of the Predominant Benefit Test

On appeal, the Third Circuit in Babcock II rejected the corrections officers’ contention that the circuits were split on the appropriate test to apply when determining whether a meal period is bona fide under § 785.19.56 In the Third Circuit’s view, the Eleventh Circuit—the only circuit to arguably apply a separate test—did not apply the relieved from all duties test.57 The Third Circuit rested this conclusion in part on its own interpretation of the Eleventh Circuit’s 1990 decision in Kohlheim.58 Kohlheim involved a claim brought by local firefighters against their town employer for the employer’s failure to compensate the firefighters’ meal periods under the overtime-pay provision of the FLSA.59 The Eleventh Circuit held in favor of the firefighters and ruled that their meal periods should have been compensated.60 The Third Circuit in Babcock II examined the Kohlheim decision and concluded that the Eleventh Circuit did not apply the relieved from all duties test in that case, as the corrections officers had asserted.61 Rather, the Third Circuit

56 Babcock II, 806 F.3d at 156; see Babcock II Appellants’ Brief, supra note 43, at *17 (“There is current [sic] a circuit split regarding the appropriate test relating to the compensation of meal periods.”). The Third Circuit in Babcock II addressed two cases from the Eleventh Circuit and Ninth Circuit that the corrections officers cited to for the proposition that the circuits were split on whether to apply the predominant benefit test or relieved from all duties test. Babcock II, 806 F.3d at 156 (citing Busk v. Integrity Staffing Sols., Inc., 713 F.3d 525, 531 n.4 (9th Cir. 2013), rev’d on other grounds, 135 S. Ct. 513 (2014), and Kohlheim v. Glynn Cty., 915 F.2d 1473, 1477 (11th Cir. 1990)). After analyzing the two cases, however, the Third Circuit concluded that the cited Ninth Circuit case did not definitively adopt either test and that the cited Eleventh Circuit case did not apply the relieved from all duties test, but rather “applied its version of the predominant benefit test.” Id.

57 Babcock II, 806 F.3d at 156 (examining case law that the corrections officers argued to have applied or adopted the relieved from all duties test and rejecting the corrections officers’ contention).

58 See id. (concluding that the court in Kohlheim v. Glynn County did not apply the relieved from all duties test).

59 See Kohlheim, 915 F.2d at 1474. The firefighters in Kohlheim would regularly work several shifts per week of approximately twenty-four hours per shift. Id. at 1474–75. Because each shift spanned the entire day, the town did not compensate the plaintiffs for three hours of each shift, thereby effectively building in three one-hour meal periods per shift. Id. at 1475. The plaintiffs brought a claim under the FLSA, arguing that the three one-hour meal periods per shift should have been compensated because they were effectively still working during these meal periods. Id.

60 See id. at 1477 (concluding that the plaintiffs’ meal periods were “compensable under FLSA regulations for overtime purposes”).

61 See Babcock II, 806 F.3d at 156 (citing Kohlheim, 915 F.2d at 1477) (concluding that the Eleventh Circuit did not apply the relieved from all duties test in Kohlheim). At the time of the Babcock II decision, the only circuit that could have been said to apply the relieved from all duties test was the Eleventh Circuit. See Chao v. Tyson Foods, Inc., 568 F. Supp. 2d 1300, 1307 n.4 (N.D. Ala. 2008) (noting that the Eleventh Circuit applies the “completely relieved from duty” standard when interpreting § 785.19 and acknowledging that the Eleventh Circuit was an outlier among the circuits by doing do). By concluding that the Eleventh Circuit did not apply the re-
concluded that the actual test applied in *Kohlheim* was a derivation of the predominant benefit test. To support its conclusion, the Third Circuit cited a portion of the Eleventh Circuit’s analysis in *Kohlheim* that noted that the restrictions placed upon the firefighters during their meal periods “inure[d] to the benefit of the county.”

B. Avery and the Predominant Benefit Test

In further support of its conclusion that the Eleventh Circuit had adopted the predominant benefit test, the Third Circuit in *Babcock II* cited the Eleventh Circuit’s 1994 decision in *Avery*. In *Avery*, members of the city’s police department alleged that the department had violated the FLSA by failing to properly compensate its employees during their meal periods. Notably, however, *Avery* did not involve an interpretation of § 785.19, but instead dealt exclusively with whether or not the employer could claim an exemption under section 7(k) of the FLSA (“section K”) to avoid compensating the employees’ meal periods. Under section K, public agencies may

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62 *Babcock II*, 806 F.3d at 156. The Third Circuit is not alone in its interpretation, as several courts and commentators have wrestled over whether the Eleventh Circuit does in fact apply the relieved from all duties test. *Compare* Havrilla v. United States, 125 Fed. Cl. 454, 464 (2016) (citing *Kohlheim* as precedent for the application of the predominant benefit test), and Wiessner, *supra* note 12, at *1 (concluding that the Eleventh Circuit has not adopted the relieved from all duties test), with Henson, 6 F.3d at 534–35 (recognizing the circuit split and noting that *Kohlheim* turned on the fact that the plaintiffs had not been “completely relieved from duty”).

63 *See* *Babcock II*, 806 F.3d at 156 (quoting *Kohlheim*, 915 F.2d at 1477) (“The firefighters are subject to real limitations on their freedom during mealtime which inure to the benefit of the county; accordingly, the [meal periods] are compensable under FLSA regulations for overtime purposes.”). *But see* *Kohlheim*, 915 F.2d at 1477 (“[T]he essential consideration in determining whether a meal period is a bona fide meal period . . . is whether the employees are in fact relieved from work for the purpose of eating a regularly scheduled meal.”); *infra* notes 73–80 and accompanying text (arguing that the Third Circuit misinterpreted the *Kohlheim* decision).

64 *See* *Babcock II*, 806 F.3d at 156 (citing *Avery* v. City of Talladega, 24 F.3d 1337, 1347 (11th Cir. 1994)) (“The majority of the courts of appeals have adopted [the predominant benefit test].”).

65 *See* *Avery*, 24 F.3d at 1345–46.

66 *See* Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 § 7(k), 29 U.S.C. § 207(k) (2012); *Avery*, 24 F.3d at 1344–46 (concluding that § 785.19 is a “regulation of general application” but that § 7(k) of the FLSA (“section K”) law enforcement employees are subjected to a different standard). Although the corrections officers in *Babcock II* would seemingly have been subject to the section K exemption, the court noted that neither party asserted that the exemption applied. *See* *Babcock II*, 806 F.3d at 155 n.1 (“There is a special provision in the FLSA that covers employees engaged in fire
claim an exemption and avoid paying overtime to law-enforcement and fire protection employees who typically work long shifts where they remain on-call.67 In resolving the claim, the Eleventh Circuit applied the predominant benefit test in Avery and held that the meal periods of the employees who fit within the section K exemption were not required to be compensated under the FLSA.68 Relying on this holding, the Third Circuit in Babcock II included Avery in a string citation purporting to provide an exhaustive list of U.S. Courts of Appeals that had definitively adopted the predominant benefit test for their jurisdictions.69


By concluding that the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Eleventh Circuit had adopted the predominant benefit test, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Third Circuit in 2015, in Babcock v. Butler County (“Babcock II”), mischaracterized the status of the law regarding which test the U.S. Courts of Appeals apply when determining whether a meal period is bona fide under § 785.19.70 Section A of this Part argues that the Third Circuit was incorrect...
when it concluded that the Eleventh Circuit, in 1990, in *Kohlheim v. Glynn County*, did not apply the relieved from all duties test.\textsuperscript{71} Section B argues that the Eleventh Circuit’s adoption of the predominant benefit test in 1994, in *Avery v. City of Talladega*, was narrowly tailored and was not intended as a blanket adoption of the test for the Eleventh Circuit.\textsuperscript{72}

\textbf{A. But See Kohlheim: The Eleventh Circuit Did Not Adopt the Predominant Benefit Test in Kohlheim}

The Third Circuit misinterpreted *Kohlheim* when it concluded that the Eleventh Circuit had applied a variation of the predominant benefit test.\textsuperscript{73} In reaching this conclusion, the Third Circuit in *Babcock II* cited language from the *Kohlheim* opinion that seemingly identified the “benefit” that “inure[d]” to the employer during the meal period as a consideration in determining whether a meal period is compensable.\textsuperscript{74} It appears that the court overlooked, however, the *Kohlheim* opinion’s preceding paragraph that identified the “the essential consideration” in determining whether or not a meal period is bona fide under § 785.19 to be “whether the employees are in fact relieved from work for the purpose of eating.”\textsuperscript{75} Accordingly, the Eleventh Circuit’s apparent consideration of the “benefit” that “inure[d]” to the employer during the meal period should not have been construed by the Third Circuit in *Babcock II* as an application of the predominant benefit test.\textsuperscript{76} Moreover, the Eleventh Circuit’s repeated deference to the explicit language of § 785.19’s definition

\textsuperscript{71} See infra notes 73–80 and accompanying text.

\textsuperscript{72} See infra notes 81–92 and accompanying text.

\textsuperscript{73} See *Kohlheim*, 915 F.2d at 1477 (applying the relieved from all duties test). Numerous courts have recognized that the Eleventh Circuit in *Kohlheim* applied the relieved from all duties test. See, e.g., *Reich*, 121 F.3d at 64–65 (recognizing that the court in *Kohlheim* applies a different test than the predominant benefit test); *Henson*, 6 F.3d at 534–35 (noting that the court in *Kohlheim* required compensation for firefighters who were not “completely relieved from duty” during their meal periods); *O’Hara v. Menino*, 253 F. Supp. 2d 147, 155–56 (D. Mass. 2003) (concluding that the court in *Kohlheim* applied the relieved from all duties test); *Summers v. Howard Univ.*, 127 F. Supp. 2d 27, 33 (D.D.C. 2000) (same).

\textsuperscript{74} See *Babcock v. Butler Cty.* (*Babcock II*), 806 F.3d 153, 156 (3d Cir. 2015) (quoting *Kohlheim*, 915 F.2d at 1477) (“The firefighters are subject to real limitations on their freedom during mealtime which inure to the benefit of the county; accordingly, the [meal periods] are compensable under FLSA regulations for overtime purposes.”).

\textsuperscript{75} *Kohlheim*, 915 F.2d at 1477; see also A.B.A., *Federal Labor Standards: Report of the Committee on Federal Labor Standards Legislation*, 7 LAB. LAW. 701, 726 (1991) (concluding that the Eleventh Circuit in *Kohlheim* held that the firefighters were not completely relieved of their duties and thus their meal periods were compensable under the FLSA).

\textsuperscript{76} See *Kohlheim*, 915 F.2d at 1477 (describing the “essential consideration” of § 785.19 determinations as whether or not the employee is “relieved from work”).
of a bona fide meal period reflects the court’s view that the regulation should be interpreted literally.77 The test that most naturally follows from a plain reading of the regulation is the relieved from all duties test.78 Furthermore, several of the U.S. Courts of Appeals and U.S. District Courts have recognized that the Eleventh Circuit applied the relieved from all duties test in Kohlheim.79 Thus, as long as Kohlheim remains good law, the circuits remain split on which test to apply when determining whether a meal period is bona fide under § 785.19.80

B. An Overbroad Reading of a Narrow Holding: The Third Circuit Expands the Scope of Avery’s Adoption of the Predominant Benefit Test

The Third Circuit improperly expanded the scope of Avery’s holding when it cited Avery as further support for the conclusion that the Eleventh Circuit had adopted the predominant benefit test.81 Although the Eleventh Circuit did indeed apply the predominant benefit test in Avery—rather than involving an interpretation of § 785.19, as Kohlheim had—the case in the Avery dealt solely with section K of the overtime-pay provision and its administering regulations.82 In fact, the Eleventh Circuit explicitly distinguished Avery from Kohlheim.83

77 See id. at 1477 & n.20 (hailing § 785.19 as “an appropriate statement of the law” and noting that the regulation “offer[s] a useful and fair standard by which to determine whether a meal period should be considered worktime under the FLSA”).

78 See id. at 1477; see also supra note 28 and accompanying text (explaining that the relieved from all duties test follows the plain meaning of the language in § 785.19).

79 See supra note 70 and accompanying text (compiling cases recognizing the circuit split on the application of the predominant benefit test); see also, e.g., Bernard v. IBP, Inc. of Neb., 154 F.3d 259, 264 n.16 (5th Cir. 1998) (failing to cite Kohlheim in a footnote purporting to provide an exhaustive list of U.S. Courts of Appeals that had adopted the predominant benefit test); Abendschein v. Montgomery Cty., 984 F. Supp. 356, 366 (D. Md. 1997) (concluding that the Eleventh Circuit in Kohlheim applied the relieved from all duties test).

80 See Reich, 121 F.3d at 64–65 (acknowledging the circuit split implicitly); Henson, 6 F.3d at 534–35 (same); Chao v. Tyson Foods, Inc., 568 F. Supp. 2d 1300, 1307 n.4 (N.D. Ala. 2008) (concluding that the Eleventh Circuit remains the only circuit to apply the “completely relieved from duty standard”); see also McGowan, supra note 35 (concluding that the Babcock II decision “deepens” the circuit split on the application of the predominant benefit test or the relieved from all duties test when determining the compensability of meal period under the FLSA).

81 See Avery v. City of Talladega, 24 F.3d 1337, 1345–46 (11th Cir. 1994) (noting that the case before it was one of first impression regarding the compensability of meal periods for section K law-enforcement employees and that the court’s decision stands alone and apart from its previous decision in Kohlheim).

82 See id. at 1346 (concluding that the predominant benefit test is “the appropriate standard for determining whether a section 7(k) law enforcement employee’s meal break is compensable time under the FLSA”).

83 See id. (“[A] higher level of duty is required before meal breaks are compensable for [section K] law enforcement employees . . . . The fact that [§ 785.19] contains some broad language . . . not found in the regulation applicable to law enforcement employees also supports our conclu-
Section K exempts public agencies from the requirements of the overtime-pay provision with respect to compensating law enforcement and fire protection employees. Rather than requiring public agencies to provide overtime compensation when an employee works more than forty hours in a week, as the overtime-pay provision requires, section K only requires overtime compensation for exempted employees once they exceed a threshold number of work hours over a twenty-eight day period. Thus, under section K, a law enforcement employee could conceivably work eighty hours in a five day workweek without receiving overtime pay if the total number of his or her work hours over the twenty-eight day period fell below two hundred and sixteen, the threshold number outlined in the statute.

Because the facts of Avery and Kohlheim were readily distinguishable, the Eleventh Circuit’s adoption of the predominant benefit test in Avery was limited and the court strongly implied that the test would only apply in cases in which an employer asserts the section K exemption. Avery did not implement a blanket adoption of the predominant benefit test for the Eleventh Circuit or otherwise overrule Kohlheim in any respect. Indeed, the...
narrow scope of Avery’s holding was expressly noted in the opinion. Furthermore, the Fourth Circuit and numerous district courts within the Eleventh Circuit have acknowledged that Avery’s adoption of the predominant benefit test was limited to employees exempted under section K. Because an interpretation of § 785.19 was not at issue in Avery, the Third Circuit’s citation to its holding in Babcock II is misplaced. Kohlheim’s application of the relieved from all duties test therefore remains controlling law in the Eleventh Circuit for employees not otherwise exempt under section K.

CONCLUSION

In reaching its holding in Babcock v. Butler County, the Third Circuit mischaracterized the status of the law on whether the U.S. Courts of Appeals uniformly apply the predominant benefit test when determining the compensability of an employee’s meal period under the FLSA. Although indeed an outlier among the U.S. Courts of Appeals, the Eleventh Circuit’s application of the relieved from all duties test in Kohlheim v. Glynn County nevertheless remains controlling authority in the circuit’s jurisdiction. Given the far reaching implications that a circuit’s adoption and application of

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89 See Avery, 24 F.3d at 1345–46 (“[W]e have never before addressed whether we should apply the predominant benefit test to . . . [section K] law enforcement employees . . . . If we were to extend [Kohlheim] to law enforcement officers, we would defeat the apparent regulatory intent to subject [section K] law enforcement officers to a different standard.”).

90 See, e.g., Roy v. Cty. of Lexington, 141 F.3d 533, 545 n.6 (4th Cir. 1998) (noting that several cases, including Avery, involved employees exempted under section K, and thus the court did “not rely on th[ose] cases” in deciding to adopt the predominant benefit test); Perez v. La Bella Vida ALF, Inc., No. 8:14-CV-2487-T-33TGW, 2015 WL 6157102, at *6 (M.D. Fla. Oct. 19, 2015) (noting that Kohlheim held that, under § 785.19, an employee must be relieved of all of their duties or the meal period will be compensated); Chao, 568 F. Supp. 2d at 1307 n.4 (concluding that the Avery holding requires the application of the predominant benefit test for claims brought by plaintiffs subject to the section K exemption whereas the “completely relieved from duty standard applies to § 785.19 claims in this circuit”); Arrington v. City of Macon, 986 F. Supp. 1474, 1482 (M.D. Ga. 1997) (acknowledging that Avery’s application of the predominant benefit test was limited to section K law enforcement employees). In Roy v. County of Lexington, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit in 1998 adopted the predominant benefit test but expressly stated that in coming to that decision, it did not look to the Eleventh Circuit’s Avery opinion for support because Avery’s application of the predominant benefit test was restricted to employees subject to the section K exemption. Roy, 141 F.3d at 545 n.6.

91 See Avery, 24 F.3d at 1346 (noting that Kohlheim turned solely on the interpretation of § 785.19 whereas the case before the court dealt with section K exempt law enforcement employees); see also McGowan, supra note 35 (concluding that the Eleventh Circuit applied the “relieved from duty” standard).

92 See Chao, 568 F. Supp. 2d at 1307 n.4 (“[T]he completely relieved from duty standard applies to § 785.19 claims in this circuit, regardless of how other circuits have interpreted the regulation. Therefore, any argument posited by either party to this action that the Eleventh Circuit applies the predominant benefit test to meal period claims under 785.19 is inapposite.”).
either test has on the rights and responsibilities of employers and employees alike, it is vital that the status of the law remain clear.

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