

Chiles v. Salazar (2026)

Justice Gorsuch delivered the opinion of the Court.

Kaley Chiles is a mental-health counselor in Colorado. In this case, we consider her First Amendment challenge to a state law regulating what she may say when speaking with her clients.

I A

According to Ms. Chiles’s verified complaint, she holds a master's degree in clinical mental health and a state counseling license. Clients seek her help on a wide variety of mental-health issues, including trauma, addiction, “eating disorders, gender dysphoria[,] and sexuality.” Ms. Chiles “does not begin counseling” on any topic “with any predetermined goals.” Nor does she seek to “impose her values or beliefs” on clients. Instead, she “sits down ... and talks to them about their goals.” Only after clients have identified their own aspirations does Ms. Chiles begin “formulat[ing] methods of counseling that will most benefit” them. In any counseling that follows, as well, Ms. Chiles seeks to respect her “clients’ fundamental right of self-determination.”

On matters of sexuality and gender, Ms. Chiles's clients, including minors, come to her with different goals in mind. Some “are content with” their sexual orientation and gender identity and seek assistance only with “social issues, family relationships,” and the like. In cases like those, Ms. Chiles does not try to persuade her clients to “change their attractions, behavior, or identity,” but aims instead to help them address their stated goals. Other clients, however, come to her hoping to “reduce or eliminate unwanted sexual attractions, change sexual behaviors, or grow in the experience of harmony with [their] bod[ies].” And in these cases, too, Ms. Chiles seeks to help her clients reach their own stated objectives. In doing so, she does not prescribe any medicines, perform any physical treatments, or engage in any coercive or aversive practices. All Ms. Chiles offers is talk therapy.

B

In 2019, Colorado adopted a law prohibiting licensed counselors from engaging in “conversion therapy” with minors. The State reports that it adopted the law “in response to a growing mental health crisis among Colorado teenagers and mounting evidence that conversion therapy is associated with increased depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, and suicide attempts.”

The term “conversion therapy” may evoke physical techniques such as “electric shoc[k]” therapy aimed at changing an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity. But Colorado's ban on conversion therapy reaches further, forbidding “*any* practice or treatment . . . that attempts . . . to change an individual’s sexual orientation or gender identity.” The law forbids as well any “effor[t] to change behaviors or gender expressions or to eliminate or reduce sexual or romantic attraction or feelings toward individuals of the same sex.” At the same time, the law explicitly allows counselors to engage in “practices” that provide “[a]cceptance, support, and understanding for the facilitation of an individual's ... identity exploration and development.” Likewise, the law allows counselors to provide “[a]ssistance to a person undergoing gender transition.”

After Colorado adopted its new law, Ms. Chiles filed suit in federal court and sought a preliminary injunction prohibiting the State from enforcing it against her. She did not dispute that the statute has many valid applications. Indeed, Ms. Chiles did not take issue with Colorado's effort to ban what she herself calls “long-abandoned, aversive” physical interventions. Instead, Ms. Chiles objected to Colorado's law only as it applies to her talk therapy, therapy that involves no physical interventions or medications, only the spoken word.

Ms. Chiles's as-applied challenge ran this way. With respect to gender identity, she claimed, the law permits her to speak in ways that encourage a client ““undergoing gender transition,”” but the law prohibits her from speaking in ways that help a client “realign [his] identity with [his] sex.” With respect to sexual orientation, Ms. Chiles continued, Colorado's law similarly allows her to affirm a client's sexual orientation, but prohibits her from speaking in any way that helps a client “change” his sexual attractions or behaviors. Even though Colorado's law surely has other constitutional applications, she insisted, these constraints strip her of her First Amendment right to speak freely with her clients in ways she believes might help them meet “their own goals.”

II

The question before us is a narrow one. Ms. Chiles does not question that Colorado's law banning conversion therapy has some constitutionally sound applications. She does not take issue with the State's effort to prohibit what she herself calls “long-abandoned, aversive” physical interventions. Instead, Ms. Chiles stresses that she provides only talk therapy, employing no physical techniques or medications. Yet, she argues, Colorado's law still applies to her, prescribing what she may say in “voluntary counseling conversations” with her clients. And because that application of the law strikes at the heart of the First Amendment's protections for free speech, she contends, it warrants considerably more searching scrutiny than the rational-basis review the Tenth Circuit applied in this case or the intermediate-scrutiny review some other lower courts have employed in cases like hers. We agree. To explain why, we begin by outlining the relevant First Amendment principles that govern us before discussing how they apply here.

A

The First Amendment “envisions the United States as a rich and complex place” where all enjoy the “‘freedom to think as you will and to speak as you think.’ ” 303 *Creative LLC v. Elenis* (2023) (quoting *Boy Scouts of America v. Dale* (2000)). Often, speech may prove illuminating and inspiring. Sometimes, it can be misguided, offensive, or cause “incalculable grief.” *Snyder v. Phelps* (2011). But either way, the First Amendment protects the inalienable right of every individual to decide for himself “how best to speak.” *Riley v. National Federation of Blind of N. C., Inc.* (1988). In this Nation, no official—“high or petty”—may command our tongues or silence our voices. *West Virginia Bd. of Ed. v. Barnette* (1943).

Consistent with the First Amendment's jealous protections for the individual's right to think and speak freely, this Court has long held that laws regulating speech based on its subject matter or “communicative content” are “presumptively unconstitutional.” *Reed v. Town of Gilbert* (2015). As a general rule, such “content-based” restrictions trigger “strict scrutiny,” a demanding standard that

requires the government to prove its restriction on speech is “narrowly tailored to serve compelling state interests.” *Ibid.* Under that test, it is “rare that a regulation ... will ever be permissible.” *Brown v. Entertainment Merchants Assn.* (2011) (quoting *United States v. Playboy Entertainment Group, Inc.*, (2000)).

We have recognized, as well, the even greater dangers associated with regulations that discriminate based on the speaker's point of view. When the government seeks not just to restrict speech based on its subject matter, but also seeks to dictate what particular “opinion or perspective” individuals may express on that subject, “the violation of the First Amendment is all the more blatant.” *Rosenberger v. Rector and Visitors of Univ. of Va.* (1995). “Viewpoint discrimination,” as we have put it, represents “an egregious form” of content regulation, and governments in this country must nearly always “abstain” from it.

Of course, with almost any rule comes exceptions. And this Court has recognized a “few historic and traditional categories of expression long familiar to the bar” where content-based restrictions on speech will not automatically trigger strict scrutiny—categories that include fraud, defamation, and “fighting words.” *United States v. Alvarez*, (2012). But, as we have taken pains to emphasize, these exceptional categories are few and narrowly drawn, and all share a long and well-recognized historical pedigree. Indeed, even within these categories we have sometimes still applied strict scrutiny when governments have sought to regulate speech based on viewpoint. *R. A. V. v. St. Paul*, (1992) (addressing an ordinance that barred certain “fighting words” based on viewpoint).

From these general principles, other more specific ones follow. So, for example, a law regulating the content of speech cannot avoid searching First Amendment review just because it mostly regulates non-expressive conduct. Take a classic illustration: *Cohen v. California* (1971). There, the State of California charged Paul Cohen with “maliciously and willfully disturb[ing] the peace.” Often, of course, a person disturbs the peace through conduct alone (say, by brawling at a city council meeting). But that is not always true. And in Mr. Cohen's case, California charged him for disturbing the peace because he wore a jacket bearing the words “Fuck the Draft” in the corridor of a municipal courthouse. As applied to him, the Court recognized, the law implicated core First Amendment concerns because the only “conduct” he engaged in was the speech he displayed. And, we held, California could not constitutionally punish him because of the “content” of his message. . . .

. . . [T]he First Amendment's protections extend to licensed professionals much as they do to everyone else. It's a point we have since discussed at length in *NIFLA*. There, California sought to require crisis pregnancy clinics to make certain statements to their clients. The State argued that its law did not trigger demanding First Amendment review because it sought to regulate only “professional speech” by state license holders. We rejected that move. By compelling clinics to speak the State's message, the law regulated speech based on its content. And, we held, California had failed to “identif[y] a persuasive reason for treating professional speech as a unique category ... exempt from ordinary First Amendment principles.”

In reaching that conclusion, to be sure, we acknowledged two kinds of content-based restrictions that can apply to professional speech without triggering strict scrutiny. First, courts generally deploy less searching review when faced with laws that require speakers to disclose only factual, noncontroversial information in “commercial speech.” *Zauderer v. Office of Disciplinary Counsel of Supreme Court of Ohio* (1985). Second, laws regulating conduct in ways that incidentally sweep in speech may also generally avoid strict scrutiny. *NIFLA*. As with laws addressing fraud, defamation, and “fighting words,” laws regulating speech along these two lines enjoy a long historical tradition. But, we stressed, neither “turn[s] on the fact” that a licensed professional happens to be speaking. Nor, we emphasized, do these narrow categories of lesser-protected speech warrant a new rule exempting a broader “category called ‘professional speech’” from demanding First Amendment review.

B

Applying these principles, we conclude that the courts below failed to apply sufficiently rigorous First Amendment scrutiny in this case.

Start with the most obvious point. While the First Amendment protects many and varied forms of expression, the spoken word is perhaps the quintessential form of protected speech. And that is exactly the kind of expression in which Ms. Chiles seeks to engage. As a talk therapist, all Ms. Chiles does is speak with clients; she does not prescribe medication, use medical devices, or employ any physical methods.

Next, and nearly as clear to our eyes, Colorado seeks to regulate the content of Ms. Chiles's speech. When it comes to issues of human sexuality, some of her clients “are content with” their sexual identity and orientation and want help only “with social issues [or] family relationships.” But other clients seek her counsel on how to “reduce or eliminate unwanted sexual attractions, change sexual behaviors, or grow in the experience of harmony with [their] bod[ies].” And in those cases, Colorado regulates how Ms. Chiles may respond. Under its law, she may not speak in any way that attempts to change a client's “sexual orientation or gender identity”—including a client's “behaviors or gender expressions”—or in any way that seeks to “eliminate or reduce” a client's “sexual or romantic attraction or feelings toward individuals of the same sex.”

Doubtless, Colorado sees things differently. The State insists, and the Tenth Circuit agreed, that its law does not “regulate expression” at all, only “conduct,” “treatment,” or a “therapeutic modality.” As a result, Colorado reasons, its law triggers no more than rational-basis or intermediate-scrutiny review. But the State's premise is simply mistaken. In many applications, the State's law banning “conversion therapy” may address conduct—such as aversive physical interventions. But here, Ms. Chiles seeks to engage only in speech, and as applied to her the law regulates what she may say. Her speech does not become conduct just because the State may call it that. Nor does her speech become conduct just because it can also be described as a “treatment,” a “therapeutic modality,” or anything else. The First Amendment is no word game. And the rights it protects cannot be renamed away or their protections nullified by “mere labels.” *NAACP v. Button* (1963). . . .

Under the First Amendment, what matters is not how a government describes its law or whether the law may regulate conduct in other circumstances. What matters is whether, in fact, the law regulates speech in the case at hand.

As applied here, Colorado's law does not just regulate the content of Ms. Chiles's speech. It goes a step further, prescribing what views she may and may not express. For a gay client, Ms. Chiles may express “[a]cceptance, support, and understanding for the facilitation of ... identity exploration.” For a client “undergoing gender transition,” Ms. Chiles may likewise offer words of “[a]ssistance.” But if a gay or transgender client seeks her counsel in the hope of changing his sexual orientation or gender identity, Ms. Chiles cannot provide it. The law forbids her from saying anything that “attempts ... to change” a client's “sexual orientation or gender identity,” including anything that might represent an “effor[t] to change [her client's] behaviors or gender expressions or ... romantic attraction[s].” Colorado disputes none of this; neither does the dissent.

Of course, Ms. Chiles remains free to say other things. As Colorado and the dissent emphasize, she may “shar[e] information” about sexual orientation or gender identity. She can “criticiz[e] Colorado's law.” *Ibid.* She can “writ[e] papers” espousing her views. She may even encourage a client to seek advice from someone else who doesn't hold a state license. But true as all that may be, it is also true that she cannot voice certain “perspective[s]” the State disfavors when speaking with consenting clients. *Rosenberger*. And, under our precedents, viewpoint restrictions like that are not subject to mere rational-basis review or intermediate scrutiny. Rather, they represent “an egregious form of content discrimination” where First Amendment concerns are at their most “blatant.”

The fact that the State's viewpoint regulation targets only licensed healthcare professionals like Ms. Chiles changes nothing. Colorado and the dissent may believe that the First Amendment should carry “far less salience” for the Nation's millions of “medical professionals” than for everyone else. They may believe that state-imposed orthodoxies in speech pose few dangers and many benefits in this field (and who knows what others). But their policy is not the First Amendment's. The Constitution does not protect the right of some to speak freely; it protects the right of all. It safeguards not only popular ideas; it secures, even and especially, the right to voice dissenting views. Consistent with these principles, our precedents have expressly rejected the State and dissent's notion that “professional speech” represents some “separate category of speech” subject to “diminished constitutional protection.” *NIFLA*. History is littered with examples of official efforts to manipulate and control professional speech—including “the content of doctor-patient discourse”—in ways designed “to increase state power,” “suppress minorities,” and muzzle “unpopular ideas.” And the “dangers associated with” censorship, we have recognized, are no less acute “in the fields of medicine and public health” than they are anywhere else.

Nor does Colorado's law implicate any recognized exception to our usual First Amendment rules. As we have seen, some laws regulating speech based on its content—like ones addressing fraud, defamation, and “fighting words”—do not generally trigger heightened scrutiny because of their long historical pedigree. As we have seen, too, *NIFLA* recognized that two kinds of such laws sometimes apply to professionals. But Colorado's law fits in neither category. The State does not require professionals to disclose “factual, noncontroversial information in their commercial speech.” Instead, Colorado seeks to suppress views Ms. Chiles wishes to express. Nor, with respect to Ms. Chiles, does Colorado's law

regulate conduct in a way that only “incidentally burden[s] speech.” All Ms. Chiles does is speak—and, as far as she is concerned, speech is all Colorado seeks to regulate.

Resisting this conclusion, Colorado and the dissent try to shoehorn the State's statute into the latter category. By defining prohibited “conversion therapy” broadly, Colorado observes, its law proscribes a “wide range” of “treatments.” . . . The dissent pursues a similar theme, insisting that Colorado has only incidentally prohibited Ms. Chiles's speech because the law's “primary objective” is to regulate medical treatments.

This argument echoes Colorado's claim that it seeks to regulate only conduct, and they falter for similar reasons. If a government could reclassify talk therapy as speech incident to conduct, it might just as easily do the same for speech incident to “teaching or protesting.” Governments could easily wield all manner of laws regulating some conduct to silence speech they disfavor. It is a result that would not “compor[t] with the First Amendment's animating principles” so much as betray them. . . .

At bottom, Colorado and the dissent fundamentally misconceive this Court's speech-incident-to-conduct precedents. In these cases, the question is not whether a law mostly addresses conduct and only sometimes sweeps in speech. Instead, the focus lies on two entirely different questions: whether the law in question restricts speech only because it is integrally related to unlawful conduct—or whether the law restricts expressive conduct only for reasons unrelated to its content. Illustrative of the first category, this Court has held that strict scrutiny does not apply to regulations aimed at speech promoting the sale of contraband because such speech is often bound up with traditional criminal conduct. *United States v. Williams* (2008); *Giboney v. Empire Storage & Ice Co.* (1949); Brief for Eugene Volokh as *Amicus Curiae*. Illustrative of the second category, “an ordinance against outdoor fires” would not require a court to apply strict scrutiny even if it prohibited burning a flag in protest, because the law forbids conduct without regard to the message it may convey. *Sorrell v. IMS Health Inc.* (2011).

Colorado's law does not regulate speech incident to conduct under either test. The State does not dictate what Ms. Chiles may say because her speech bears a close causal connection to some separately unlawful conduct like a traditional crime. Rather, Ms. Chiles seeks to speak with interested clients about steps they might take to change unwanted behaviors, expressions, or attractions related to sexual orientation or gender identity—conduct Colorado itself does not dispute those clients (or anyone else) may lawfully undertake. Nor does Colorado seek to regulate Ms. Chiles's speech for reasons unrelated to its content, like a ban on outdoor fires that happens to sweep in flag burning. Instead, the State's law trains directly on the content of her speech and permits her to express some viewpoints but not others. Colorado does not regulate speech incident to conduct; it regulates “speech as speech.”

C

. . . . Colorado contends that its law falls within a long tradition of permissible content regulation. It's a line of argument that comes with a daunting burden. Under our precedents, the State must present “persuasive” historical evidence in order to overcome our “especia[l]” “reluctan[ce] to mark off new categories of speech for diminished constitutional protection.” *NIFLA*. Still, Colorado insists, it can carry that burden in this case because States have traditionally enjoyed wide latitude to proscribe

“substandard care” even when that involves regulating the content of speech. As evidence, Colorado points to the history of state laws licensing the practice of medicine, regulating informed consent, and permitting tort suits for medical malpractice. The dissent pursues the same point citing the same authorities.

This argument stumbles out of the gate, for it proceeds at far too high a level of generality. From three specific sets of laws, Colorado and the dissent ask us to recognize a cavernous “First Amendment Free Zone,” *Stevens*, one in which States may censor almost any speech they consider “substandard care.” It is, once more, an approach our precedents already foreclose. . .

Beyond that problem lies another. Taking each of the three traditions Colorado and the dissent invoke on its own terms—as we must—none delivers the support they suppose.

Start with Colorado's suggestion, endorsed by the dissent, that the State's statute represents nothing more than a traditional law licensing the practice of medicine. We cannot agree for at least two reasons. First, the State has not presented persuasive evidence that its law is part of a historical tradition. When assessed at the level of generality our precedents demand, what Colorado describes turns out to be a relatively recent innovation. Indeed, the briefing before us suggests that the very first state “counselor-licensure bill” was adopted only in 1976. And that is far from the sort of “persuasive evidence” of a historically grounded practice our precedents require. . . .

Consider, too, where the State and dissent's logic leads. Not long ago, many medical experts and organizations, including the American Psychiatric Association, considered homosexuality a mental disorder. On the view Colorado and the dissent advance, a law adopted during that era prohibiting counselors from engaging in the “substandard care” of affirming their clients’ homosexuality would have been subject to only rational-basis or intermediate-scrutiny review—and likely upheld. Today, tomorrow, and forever, too, any professional speech that deviates from “current beliefs about the safety and efficacy of various medical treatments” could be silenced with relative ease. It is a consequence Colorado freely acknowledges. And one the dissent embraces. So what if that kind of reflexive deference to currently prevailing professional views may not always end well? Cf. *Buck v. Bell* (1927).

Fortunately, that is not the world the First Amendment envisions for us. Licensed professionals “have a host of good-faith disagreements” about the “prudence” and “ethics” of various practices in their fields. Medical consensus, too, is not static; it evolves and always has. A prevailing standard of care may reflect what most practitioners believe today, but it cannot mark the outer boundary of what they may say tomorrow. Far from a test of professional consensus, the First Amendment rests instead on a simple truth: “[T]he people lose” whenever the government transforms prevailing opinion into enforced conformity. *Ibid.*

III

We do not doubt that the question “how best to help minors” struggling with issues of gender identity or sexual orientation is presently a subject of “fierce public debate.” *Tingley v. Ferguson* (2023) (Thomas, J., dissenting from denial of certiorari). But Colorado's law addressing conversion therapy does not just

ban physical interventions. In cases like this, it censors speech based on viewpoint. Colorado may regard its policy as essential to public health and safety. Certainly, censorious governments throughout history have believed the same. But the First Amendment stands as a shield against any effort to enforce orthodoxy in thought or speech in this country. It reflects instead a judgment that every American possesses an inalienable right to think and speak freely, and a faith in the free marketplace of ideas as the best means for discovering truth. However well-intentioned, any law that suppresses speech based on viewpoint represents an “egregious” assault on both of those commitments. *Rosenberger*.

Justice Kagan, with whom Justice Sotomayor joins, concurring.

The Court today decides that the Colorado law challenged here, as applied to talk therapy, conflicts with core First Amendment principles because it regulates speech based on viewpoint. I agree. I write only to note that if Colorado had instead enacted a content-based but viewpoint-neutral law, it would raise a different and more difficult question. . . .

Colorado's law, as applied to talk therapy, regulates based on viewpoint, for the reasons the Court gives. The law forbids a counselor to provide therapy designed to “change [a minor's] sexual orientation or gender identity.” At the same time, the law specifically allows a counselor to offer therapy expressing “[a]cceptance, support,” and other affirmation of the minor's “identity exploration.” So, for example, the law prevents a therapist from saying she can help a minor change his same-sex orientation, but permits her to say that such a goal is impossible and so she will help him accept his gay identity. Colorado does not dispute that point. Nor does it dispute that under normal First Amendment principles, that difference constitutes viewpoint discrimination. Indeed, the case is textbook. The law “distinguishes between two opposed sets of ideas”—the one resisting, the other reflecting, the State's own view of how to speak with minors about sexual orientation and gender identity. Or said just a bit differently, the law draws a line based on the speaker's “opinion or perspective,” and thus enables “speech on only one side”—the State's preferred side—of an ideologically charged issue.

Of course, it does not matter what the State's preferred side *is*. Consider a hypothetical law that is the mirror image of Colorado's. Instead of barring talk therapy designed to change a minor's sexual orientation or gender identity, this law bars therapy affirming those things. As Ms. Chiles readily acknowledges, the First Amendment would apply in the identical way. Once again, because the State has suppressed one side of a debate, while aiding the other, the constitutional issue is straightforward.

It would, however, be less so if the law under review was content based but viewpoint neutral. Such content-based laws, as the Court explains, trigger strict scrutiny “[a]s a general rule.” But our precedents respecting those laws recognize complexity and nuance. We apply our most demanding standard when there is any “realistic possibility that official suppression of ideas is afoot”—when, that is, a (merely) content-based law may reasonably be thought to pose the dangers that viewpoint-based laws always do. But when that is not the case—when a law, though based on content, raises no real concern that the government is censoring disfavored ideas—then we have not infrequently “relax[ed] our guard.” *Reed* (opinion of Kagan, J.). . . .

The same may well be true of content-based but viewpoint-neutral laws regulating speech in doctors' and counselors' offices.¹ Medical care typically involves speech, so the regulation of medical care (which is, of course, pervasive) may involve speech restrictions. And those restrictions will generally refer to the speech's content. . . . Fuller consideration of that question, though, can wait for another day. We need not here decide how to assess viewpoint-neutral laws regulating health providers' expression because, as the Court holds, Colorado's is not one.

Justice Jackson, dissenting.

“[T]here is no right to practice medicine which is not subordinate to the police power of the States.” *Lambert v. Yellowley* (1926). This was true 100 years ago, and it should be true today.

Many States have now chosen to exercise their police powers to ban “conversion therapy” based on the medical profession's broad consensus that this medical treatment (which seeks to change a gay or transgender person's sexual orientation or gender identity) is ineffective and harmful. This case involves the Colorado Legislature's policy decision to prohibit licensed medical professionals from offering or providing conversion therapy to minors in that State. . . .

“The power of government to regulate the professions is not lost whenever the practice of a profession entails speech.” *Lowe v. SEC* (1985) (White, J., concurring in result). And “[m]edical professionals do not, generally speaking, have a right to use the Constitution as a weapon allowing them rigorously to control the content of ... reasonable conditions” that a State imposes on licensed healthcare providers for the protection of its residents. *National Institute of Family and Life Advocates v. Becerra* (2018) (Breyer, J., dissenting) (*NIFLA*).

So, I respectfully dissent. Stated simply, the majority has failed to appreciate the crucial context in which Chiles's constitutional claims have arisen. Chiles is not speaking in the ether; she is providing therapy to minors as a licensed healthcare professional. The Tenth Circuit was correct to observe that “[t]here is a long-established history of states regulating the healthcare professions.” And, until today, the First Amendment has not blocked their way. For good reason: Under our precedents, bedrock First Amendment principles have far less salience when the speakers are medical professionals and their treatment-related speech is being restricted incidentally to the State's regulation of the provision of medical care.

No one directly disputes that Colorado has the power to regulate the medical treatments that state-licensed professionals provide to patients. Nor is it asserted that, when doing so, a State always runs afoul of the Constitution. So, in my view, it cannot also be the case that Colorado's decision to restrict a dangerous therapy modality that, incidentally, involves provider speech is presumptively unconstitutional. In concluding otherwise, the Court's opinion misreads our precedents, is unprincipled and unworkable, and will eventually prove untenable for those who rely upon the long-recognized responsibility of States to regulate the medical profession for the protection of public health.

¹ *Note: Justice Jackson's dissenting opinion claims that this is a small, or even nonexistent, category. But even her own opinion, when listing laws supposedly put at risk today, offers quite a few examples. Her view to the contrary rests on reimagining—and in that way collapsing—the well-settled distinction between viewpoint-based and other content-based speech restrictions.

I

To properly evaluate the First Amendment claim at issue in this case, one must first understand the impetus for Colorado's regulation, what that law requires, and the nature of the speech it implicates.

A

Conversion therapy is designed to “convert” a person's sexual orientation or gender identity, so that the person will become heterosexual or cisgender. Generally speaking, conversion therapy began as an attempt to “cure” gay and transgender people of their “nonconforming” orientations or identities.

Conversion-therapy efforts have historically included aversive therapeutic modalities. Those ranged from inducing nausea, vomiting, or paralysis in patients or subjecting them to severe electric shocks to telling patients to snap an elastic band on their wrists in response to nonconforming thoughts. Aversive therapies have now fallen out of fashion; nonaversive treatments—primarily, talk therapy—are currently the predominant form of conversion therapy. All such therapies seek to encourage patients to change their behavior in an attempt to “change” their identity.

Not only is conversion therapy ineffective, former participants of conversion therapy report that it causes lasting psychological harm. Gay and transgender children who underwent nonaversive conversion therapy say they were taught to feel shame and self-hatred. And survivors of conversion therapy continue to suffer from PTSD, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. . . . As one survivor put it, conversion therapy “‘came close to killing me.’”

B

In 2019, Colorado joined 25 other States in banning the practice of conversion therapy for minors. Colorado's law—titled the Minor Conversion Therapy Law (MCTL)—prohibits licensed healthcare professionals from practicing conversion therapy with children. It defines conversion therapy as “any practice or treatment” that “attempts or purports to change an individual's sexual orientation or gender identity, including efforts to change behaviors or gender expressions or to eliminate or reduce sexual or romantic attraction or feelings toward individuals of the same sex.” . . .

C

. . . . As applied to Chiles, the MCTL treats the talk-therapy form of conversion therapy as a prohibited medical treatment. But Chiles is free to express her opinion about the efficacy of conversion therapy or her disagreement with Colorado's conclusion that such therapy is harmful to minors. Colorado's law does not target or prohibit the expression of such views by anyone in any form—including by licensed healthcare providers in discussions with patients and their families. All that Colorado's law proscribes is the provision of such therapy to minors. This means that, while Chiles can freely promote conversion therapy and vociferously decry the State's prohibition, she cannot practice that therapy without being subject to professional discipline under Colorado law.

II

I begin my analysis with a simple observation: Our First Amendment jurisprudence does not treat speech as existing in a vacuum. Instead, how the First Amendment applies to a State's power to regulate speech depends upon the context in which the regulation of speech occurs. *Vidal v. Elster* (2024) (trademark context); *Tinker v. Des Moines Independent Community School Dist.* 503 (1969) (school context). We have not mechanically held that the First Amendment protects *all* communicative content; rather, we have evaluated First Amendment claims in a nuanced way, sensitive to both core principles and the specific circumstances under which the claim arises. *Virginia Bd. of Pharmacy v. Virginia Citizens Consumer Council, Inc.* (1976) (considering First Amendment principles in the commercial speech context).

In my view, then, it matters for First Amendment purposes that the MCTL restricts treatment-related speech uttered by medical professionals only as part of a larger regulatory scheme aimed at ensuring that providers tender high-quality medical care to patients.

In Part II–A, I explain that this way of conceptualizing the question before us is not novel—we have long understood that States have the power to regulate medical professionals. And our precedents demonstrate that, when a healthcare provider's speech is incidentally restricted as part of a state-law scheme regulating the provision of medical treatments, the heightened scrutiny we reflexively apply in other situations is not warranted. In Part II–B, I show that First Amendment principles are not offended when lesser scrutiny is applied to a state law regulating medical treatments in a manner that incidentally restricts a provider's professional medical speech.

A

1

. . . In *NIFLA*, we reaffirmed the principle from *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pa. v. Casey* that the First Amendment inquiry requires consideration of whether the regulated speech was made during the provision of medical care. *NIFLA* involved a challenge to a California law that required certain crisis pregnancy centers to post notices in their waiting rooms informing low-income patients that California paid for qualifying abortions. We asked whether, on the one hand, this law was regulating the clinics' speech *qua* speech, or whether, on the other, the notice requirement was actually regulating the clinics' professional conduct and only incidentally restricting speech. If the latter, the *NIFLA* Court explained, California's notice requirement would fit into the category of cases that *Casey* illustrated; namely, those in which “this Court has upheld regulations of professional conduct that incidentally burden speech.” Relying in part on *Casey*'s analytical framework, the *NIFLA* Court held that California's law regulated “speech as speech.” We explained this conclusion by contrasting the Pennsylvania regulation at issue in *Casey*: While the [abortion] notice requirement in *Casey* restricted doctors' speech, it did so “only ‘as part of the *practice* of medicine.’” The notice requirement at issue in *NIFLA*, by contrast, was “not an informed-consent requirement or any other regulation of professional conduct.” . . .

The takeaway from *NIFLA* is that *Casey* applied a lower level of scrutiny *because* the law in *Casey* restricted speech uttered in the course of—and as a part of—providing professional medical care. By contrast, the notice requirement in *NIFLA* was not “tied to a procedure at all” and was therefore

meaningfully different: That law restricted “speech as speech.” Thus, the key distinction, as the *NIFLA* Court saw it, was whether the challenged law was a regulation of speech *as such* or a regulation of “professional conduct that incidentally burden[ed] speech.” .

2

. . . In my view, it is obvious that the MCTL is regulating professional conduct insofar as it prohibits providing a particular therapy; the aim of the statute is not suppressing speech. Indeed, Chiles's claim that her (otherwise protected) speech is being swept up by Colorado's (otherwise valid) treatment prohibition proves that very point. This set of circumstances seems to fit *NIFLA*'s idea of permissible state “regulation of professional conduct” that “incidentally burdens speech” to a “T.”

Yet, the majority strangely suggests otherwise with the opinion it hands down today. The majority does this primarily by eschewing serious engagement with the interaction between *NIFLA* and *Casey*. Its workaround seems to be: The First Amendment applies full bore here because Chiles's *speech* is being impacted; after all, she is a *talk* therapy provider. But when *NIFLA*'s teachings are properly understood, this comeback is no answer. Yes, Chiles happens to be talking when she's providing therapy to patients, but the MCTL regulates the provision of medical treatments by licensed medical professionals, which States are fully empowered to do. That Chiles's kind of medical care involves talk therapy is, in *NIFLA*'s words, merely “incidenta[l].” . . .

. . . The real lesson of *NIFLA*'s discussion of *Casey* is this: When a healthcare professional's speech is not being targeted “as speech” (because it conveys an idea) but is instead “incidentally” restricted due to a State's otherwise legitimate regulation of the medical treatments being offered to patients, heightened scrutiny is not warranted. . . .

So, at the end of the day, I think what we have here is what *Casey* involved and *NIFLA* did not: a State restricting a medical provider's speech only as part of its regulation of the provision of medical treatments to individual patients. And it is precisely because the MCTL is restricting Chiles's speech “only as part of [her] practice of medicine” that the First Amendment is not particularly bothered despite the impact on her speech. *Casey*. Accordingly, talk therapists like Chiles—just like any other healthcare provider seeking to treat patients—can presumptively be “subject[ed] to reasonable licensing and regulation by the State.”

B

The conclusion that a State can regulate the provision of medical care even if, in so doing, it incidentally restricts the speech of some providers, fully comports with the First Amendment's animating principles. These principles include the well-settled notion that context matters when evaluating First Amendment challenges to state regulation.

The context that frames today's debate is the kind of speech that is at issue here—what I am calling (as shorthand) “professional medical speech.” This is the only type of speech the MCTL restricts.

1

Properly defined, “professional medical speech” is a narrow category. It is not *all* speech “uttered by ‘professionals.’ ” *NIFLA*, 585 U. S., at 767. Rather, it is speech by healthcare professionals made as part of their provision of medical care to patients. To be even more specific, professional medical speech occurs when a medical professional speaks to a client (1) in the context of the professional-patient relationship; (2) on matters within the provider's professional expertise as defined by the medical community; (3) for the purpose of providing medical care. . . .

Finally, and most importantly, professional medical speech is made for the purpose of providing the patient with medical care. This speech is a tool employed to treat patients. In this sense, professional medical speech facilitates the professional's goal of providing the patient with the treatment, procedure, or healthcare that is within her expertise and that forms the basis of the professional-patient relationship.

2

Keeping in mind these characteristics of professional medical speech, consider the First Amendment principles that serve as guideposts for determining the level of scrutiny that a government restriction of such speech deserves.

First, and most fundamentally, is preservation of the marketplace of ideas. See *Abrams v. United States* (1919) (Holmes, J., dissenting). Indeed, the “whole project of the First Amendment” stemmed from the Founders’ desire to protect the “critically important” goal of having “a well-functioning sphere of expression, in which citizens have access to information from many sources.” *Moody v. NetChoice, LLC* (2024). Within the marketplace of ideas, speech that is expressive of the speaker's thoughts and views is, generally speaking, highly valued.

But professional medical speech does not intersect with the marketplace of ideas: “[I]n the context of medical practice we insist upon competence, not debate.” The degree to which medical providers speaking within the boundaries of providing patient care can express themselves is limited because their interactions with patients are constrained by their well-established duties to those patients and the requirement that they meet the standard of care. Moreover, given these limits, professional medical speech does not necessarily involve the expression of ideas or messages, so it does not provide significant value to the general marketplace. . . .

Within the confines of the professional-patient relationship, treatment-related “truths” are a given—they are set by licensing and malpractice standards, and it is not uncommon that such regulation incidentally restricts provider speech. Moreover, regulation of the practice of medicine is *pervasively* and *unavoidably* viewpoint based. The majority and the concurrence both resist this: They relentlessly deride Colorado for engaging in “viewpoint discrimination” by banning conversion therapy but permitting affirming care. But context makes that point ring hollow.

When a State establishes a standard of care, or punishes a doctor for providing care outside of that standard, it necessarily limits what medical professionals can say and do on the basis of viewpoint. A

State can permissibly “prohibi[t] the administration of specific drugs for particular medical uses” but not for others. *United States v. Skrmetti* (2025).²⁷ So, too, may it prohibit a doctor from encouraging a patient to commit suicide, or a dietician from telling an anorexic patient to eat less. Likewise, no one would bat an eye if a State required its doctors to discourage, but not encourage, smoking tobacco. Even though these kinds of regulations are inherently viewpoint based, in the context of medical care, a State can certainly require the medical professionals it licenses to stand on one side of an issue. . . .

Colorado's clear aim is enforcement of a standard of care that is indisputably applicable to the State's licensed healthcare professionals. Taking a position as to how those providers should handle a medical issue is the very essence of standard-setting—once again, this kind of viewpoint-based regulation ensures “competence, not debate.” My colleagues’ contrary conclusions are puzzling, for a standards-based healthcare scheme cannot function unless its regulators are permitted to choose sides.³ A second and corollary First Amendment principle is the listener's interest in receiving information. *Murthy v. Missouri* (2024); *Kleindienst v. Mandel* (1972). In the professional medical context, however, informational asymmetry shapes the listener's interest. To be sure, “[r]espect for patients’ autonomy is a cornerstone of medical ethics.” But that interest is not served by receiving *all* existing opinions—only information about treatments that are within the standard of care advances patients’ interests. Patients are not in a position to wade through medical discourse and independently evaluate the best treatment for their circumstances. Their interests as listeners are thus limited by the nature and purpose of the professional-patient relationship.

Third, and finally, the First Amendment protects a speaker's autonomy. “[T]he fundamental rule of protection under the First Amendment [is] that a speaker has the autonomy to choose the content of his own message.” *Rumsfeld v. Forum for Academic and Institutional Rights, Inc.* (2006) (quoting *Hurley v. Irish-American Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Group of Boston, Inc.* (1995)). But, here again, with respect to professional medical speech, healthcare providers do not have autonomy; when it comes to providing treatments for their patients, they are bound by the standard of care and are not generally free to “choose the content” of their message. Put differently, although medical professionals do have an autonomy interest in communicating their ideas to the patients they are treating, that interest only extends to treatment-related advice and information that is consistent with the standard of care.

² FN7: Of course, when the State discriminates “on the basis of sex and transgender status” with respect to the administration of specific drugs, that discrimination implicates the Equal Protection Clause and requires heightened scrutiny for purposes of the Fourteenth Amendment. See *Skrmetti* (Sotomayor, J., dissenting).

³ FN8: Faulting Colorado for legislating based on its view that conversion therapy is harmful for minors and that affirming care is the better treatment, the concurrence purports to save “for another day” the question whether “content-based but viewpoint-neutral laws regulating speech in doctors’ and counselors’ offices” comport with the First Amendment. *Ante* (opinion of Kagan, J.). But that magnanimity is a mirage. Standards-based regulations exist in the medical context *precisely because* the State has a view about safety or efficacy; regulation is a State's police-power prerogative to promote those views (as the standard of care) while simultaneously rejecting all others. The laws I reference in Part IV, *infra*, are not examples of content-based, viewpoint-neutral laws, as the concurrence maintains. Rather, when properly analyzed, those laws are either facially viewpoint based . . . or unavoidably viewpoint based in application. . . . But, of course, imposing the State's view of what is appropriate is the entire point of standards-based regulation. The First Amendment allows this because the State is regulating professional conduct and this professional's speech is only being incidentally restricted; the analysis does not turn on whether the State's regulation is viewpoint neutral. Neutrality is not—and cannot be—the touchstone of the laws that govern the quality of care that professionals provide to patients.

In my view, the majority is mistaken to equate treatment-related speech rendered in the context of providing medical care with any spoken words uttered by any other speaker. . . . The mutability of medical standards tells us little about the First Amendment's scope in a country where medical standards are enforceable by law and govern the treatment-related conduct of professional healthcare providers.

Like it or not, treatment standards exist in America. And those standards necessarily reflect the expert medical community's current beliefs about the safety and efficacy of various medical treatments, whatever those beliefs might be. Medical standards are driven by science (objective facts and data), but, naturally, they are not viewpoint neutral. Consequently, the people *win*—not lose—when a State incorporates medical profession's viewpoint into laws that require licensed treatment providers to conform to prevailing standards of care. For this reason, the Court has long recognized a State's power to regulate to protect its residents even in the face of uncertainty. *Gonzales v. Carhart* (2007) (collecting cases and noting the “wide discretion” afforded state legislatures to “pass legislation in areas where there is medical and scientific uncertainty”).⁴

Put differently, States impose treatment standards incorporating the current consensus of medical experts to protect state residents from harm. And they do this to ensure that professionals provide patients with high-quality care. A State that, alternatively, pursues an agenda of purposefully silencing critics, muzzling opponents, or targeting views it considers threatening would, of course, violate the First Amendment. But it behooves us all (and especially courts) to see and know the difference.

Ultimately, then, no traditional First Amendment principle justifies preventing a State from regulating medical care simply and solely because its law happens to restrict treatment-related speech. And in this case, there is zero evidence that Colorado has engaged in the corrosive and illicit suppression of ideas that the First Amendment valiantly repels. The record here does not show that Chiles is being “target[ed]” or “muzzle[d]” or “silenced” or “censor[ed],” as the majority suggests. Instead, as a healthcare provider licensed by the State of Colorado, she is simply being held to the same standard of care that all other licensed medical professionals in that State must follow.⁵The MCTL's conversion-

⁴ FN9: The majority laments that, because medical consensus is “not static,” a law like the MCTL might operate to “silenc[e]” professional speech going forward even if medical consensus swings the other way. Illustrating this problem, the majority points to shameful parts of this country's past to show the dangers that can come from regulation that relies on outdated medical practices. *Ibid.* (citing *Buck v. Bell* (1927)). But the majority does not mention that, if the standard of care does change, the state legislature has the power to change the law in response to that evidence. The majority's point seems to be that States should not be permitted to enact (rigid) laws based on current scientific thought because expert opinions might shift over time. But those uncertainties—which have always existed—are no reason to abandon medical standards or to alter how the law has traditionally accommodated scientific discoveries. The potential that medical consensus may change in the future does not mean that the Constitution prevents a State from acting today to protect its residents from what medical experts currently believe is a harmful medical treatment.

⁵ FN10: Under my analysis, evidence of speech targeting or suppression could include the fact that the challenged state regulation does not, in fact, reflect current medical consensus. If a State enacts a treatment prohibition that substantially diverges from the medical community's present beliefs, the law might well be a pretext for illicit speech-targeting objectives. Far from requiring “reflexive deference,” *ibid.*, proof of such motivation would be unearthed, and carefully examined, as part and parcel of a court's proper “speech incident to conduct” inquiry, since the doctrine is only applicable to *reasonable* State regulations. See *Planned Parenthood of Southeastern Pa. v. Casey* (1992) (joint opinion of O'Connor, Kennedy, and Souter, JJ.) (noting that medical professionals are “subject to reasonable licensing and regulation by the State”); *NIFLA* (Breyer, J., dissenting) (stating that the First Amendment yields to “reasonable conditions” that States impose on medical providers).

therapy ban only incidentally restricts professional medical speech as a result of Colorado's regulation of a harmful medical treatment; nothing compels the conclusion that a state regulation that operates to restrict this kind of communication in this way is targeting speech *qua* speech.

III

The centuries-long tradition of States using their police powers to establish and enforce the standards of care that bind medical professionals—including those who use speech to administer treatments—is another indication that heightened scrutiny does not and need not apply here. The majority's opinion largely omits this broader historical record. But, when consulted, that history demonstrates unequivocally that the MCTL is neither unusual nor inherently suspect.

States have *always* had “broad power to establish standards for licensing practitioners and regulating the practice of professions.” *Goldfarb v. Virginia State Bar* (1975). With respect to the medical profession in particular, States have used that power to control how medicine is practiced “from time immemorial.” *Dent v. West Virginia* (1889).

States have historically regulated the medical profession in two complementary ways: licensing schemes and medical-malpractice liability. Both necessarily encompass restrictions on professional medical speech through the regulation of the provision of medical care. . . .

While licensing regulates medical professionals *ex ante*, medical-malpractice lawsuits enforce those standards *ex post*. And just like medical licensing, the tort of medical malpractice has a long pedigree. . . .

In short, States have regulated professional conduct related to the provision of all kinds of medical care—and incidentally restricted speech—without constitutional affront for eons. Though the majority averts its gaze, even a cursory glance at the broader historical record is illuminating, for it reveals that States have traditionally played a significant role in setting the standards that govern the medical profession. See *Washington v. Glucksberg* (1997) (emphasizing the state interest “in protecting the integrity and ethics of the medical profession”).

With the MCTL, Colorado has merely taken up that same mantle. That law operates by prohibiting a particular medical treatment the State considers harmful, and nothing about it implicates Chiles's First Amendment rights in a markedly different fashion than other States' traditional efforts to regulate and enforce the standard of care.

One more thought on this: The majority rigidly imposes a history-and-tradition test that treats the plethora of historical examples as insufficient. But it should instead find the long tradition of state laws

setting standards of care by regulating the professional conduct of medical providers—including those who treat with speech—doubly reassuring.

For one thing, this history helps us to be confident that what Colorado is doing here is actually regulating medical care, not suppressing messages. . . . A lengthy tradition of similar regulatory efforts by States—or the absence of one—helps courts to ferret out who has the better of *that* argument.

The history also helpfully demonstrates that a lower level of scrutiny is appropriate here, despite the impact of the MCTL on Chiles's speech. We can rest easy, comforted by the fact that this law is not actually operating to suppress the expression of thoughts, messages, or ideas about conversion therapy; instead, the MCTL restricts talk therapists in the same way and to the same extent as other healthcare professionals have historically been limited when treating patients. Like other valid licensing restrictions, the MCTL does not prevent Chiles from speaking out in favor of conversion therapy, promoting conversion therapy, or otherwise lending credence to efforts to validate that therapy. All this law does is prohibit Chiles from *providing* this treatment to minor patients—no different than what Colorado and other States have been doing in the indisputably valid exercise of their police powers for centuries.⁶

All things considered, then, I reach a different conclusion in this case than the majority does because precedent, principles, and history point in the same direction: No heightened scrutiny is warranted here. The First Amendment cares about government efforts to suppress “speech as speech” (based on its expressive content), not laws that, like the MCTL, restrict speech “incidentally,” due to the government's traditional, garden-variety regulation of such speakers’ professional conduct.

IV

Ultimately, because the majority plays with fire in this case, I fear that the people of this country will get burned. . . .

The fallout could be catastrophic. Many regulations impact the speech of medical professionals in the context of their provision of healthcare to patients; the possibilities go far beyond talk therapy and informed consent. . . .

So, to put it bluntly, the Court could be ushering in an era of unprofessional and unsafe medical care administered by effectively unsupervised healthcare providers. A state license used to *mean* something

⁶ FN12: Suggesting otherwise, the majority places great stock in our decision in *Holder v. Humanitarian Law Project* (2010). *Holder* involved a law that prevented lawyers and doctors from providing “ ‘material support’ ” for others’ terrorist activities by word or deed. We subjected the law to strict scrutiny because, as applied to the plaintiffs, the law was aimed at preventing professionals from “communicating a message.” Such a regulation plainly raised the specter of suppression—i.e., that what the United States was really aiming to do was prevent those professionals from expressing support for something the United States found distasteful. In other words, the challenged law sought to punish the plaintiffs based on the expressive content of their speech. That is not what we have here. The MCTL—which follows in a long line of state regulation of healthcare providers’ treatment-related conduct—does not restrict or punish medical professionals because of the expressive content of their communications. Rather, the speech restriction happens only incidentally; the MCTL’s indisputable objective is prohibiting a harmful medical treatment. . . .

to the patients who entrust their care to licensed professionals—*i.e.*, that the person is certified to be one who provides treatments that are consistent with the standard of care.

That stops today. Indeed, it is not at all clear how, or to what extent, state regulation of medical care involving practitioner speech can survive this holding. We are on a slippery slope now: For the first time, the Supreme Court has interpreted the First Amendment to bless a risk of therapeutic harm to children by limiting the State's ability to regulate medical providers who treat patients with speech. What's next? In the worst-case scenario, our medical system unravels as various licensed healthcare professionals—talk therapists, psychiatrists, and presumably anyone else who claims to utilize speech when administering treatments to patients—start broadly wielding their new-found constitutional right to provide substandard medical care.

It is baffling that we could now be standing on the edge of a precipitous drop in the quality of healthcare services in America. But the Court sees fit to bring us one step closer to that fate today. Stranger still is the fact that this possibility looms *in the 21st century*—given what science now enables us to know about medical conditions and treatments, what our cases say, and what we all should have learned by now from history. Somehow, Justices from eras past have always understood that (as I stated at the outset) “there is no right to practice medicine which is not subordinate to the police power of the States.” *Lambert*. They correctly applied that simple but powerful understanding of our Constitution across the board—to *all* healthcare professionals, including those with practices that happen to involve treatment-related speech. We do harm to both the Nation's medical system and our First Amendment jurisprudence by ignoring that wisdom today.

* * *

The First Amendment requires heightened scrutiny when States regulate “speech as speech” but not when speech is restricted “incidentally.” *NIFLA*, 585 U. S., at 769–770. The latter occurs where, as here, a State seeks to prohibit healthcare professionals from providing a dangerous medical treatment in all of its forms, including the speech-related variety. States have traditionally regulated the provision of medical care through licensing schemes and malpractice regimes without constitutional incident. And no core principle of our First Amendment jurisprudence leads inexorably to the conclusion that it violates the Constitution for a State to prevent its licensed talk therapists from using speech to harm the minors in their care. Holding otherwise, as the majority does now, flouts centuries of state-standardized regulation of medical care and is, ultimately, nonsensical. The Constitution does not pose a barrier to reasonable regulation of harmful medical treatments just because substandard care comes via speech instead of scalpel. . . .

. . . In fact, *NIFLA* draws a different line, and the correct course of action here is to hold it: Speech uttered for purposes of providing medical treatment may be restricted incidentally when the State reasonably regulates the speaker's provision of medical treatments to patients.

To do anything else opens a dangerous can of worms. It threatens to impair States' ability to regulate the provision of medical care in any respect. It extends the Constitution into uncharted territory in an utterly irrational fashion. And it ultimately risks grave harm to Americans' health and wellbeing.