

NOT FOR PUBLICATION

In the
United States Court of Appeals
For the Eleventh Circuit

No. 25-13464
Non-Argument Calendar

WILLIAM COVERT,
an individual,

Plaintiff-Appellant,

versus

ARIELLE C. HACKING,
an individual,
ATTORNEY GENERAL, STATE OF UTAH,
JUDGE,
FIFTH DISTRICT COURT JUDGE,
State of Utah Officials,
JUDGE OF THE UTAH COURT OF APPEALS,

Defendants-Appellees.

Appeal from the United States District Court
for the Middle District of Florida
D.C. Docket No. 6:25-cv-01071-CEM-NWH

Before ABUDU, KIDD, and ANDERSON, Circuit Judges.

PER CURIAM:

William Covert, proceeding pro se, appeals the district court's determination that the *Rooker-Feldman* doctrine stripped it of jurisdiction to consider Covert's claims arising from his unsuccessful Utah state court case. After careful review, we conclude that the district court was correct in its determination as to two of Covert's three claims. We therefore affirm in part and vacate in part the district court's dismissal order and remand this case for further proceedings.

I. BACKGROUND

In June 2025, Covert filed a pro se complaint against Arielle Hacking, Utah Attorney General Derek Brown, and Utah judges Matthew Bell and Thomas Higbee. Covert alleged multiple claims relating to a defamation suit he pursued against Hacking in Utah state court that resulted in a judgment against him for Hacking's attorney fees. Along with his complaint, Covert moved for leave to proceed in forma pauperis ("IFP"). A magistrate judge took the IFP motion under advisement and instructed Covert to file an amended complaint. In this order, the magistrate judge observed that the *Rooker-Feldman* doctrine appeared to bar some of Covert's

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current claims. See *Rooker v. Fidelity Trust Co.*, 263 U.S. 413 (1923); *D.C. Court of Appeals v. Feldman*, 460 U.S. 462 (1983).

Covert thereafter filed an amended 42 U.S.C. § 1983 complaint, which raised three claims against the previously named defendants and a third Utah state court judge, Gregory Orme. In Count One, Covert asserted that the Utah statute governing attorney fees, as applied by the courts in his defamation case, was unconstitutional. He requested injunctive relief from each adverse court decision, as well as injunctive relief preventing the enforcement of the statute against him in state court.

In Count Two, Covert alleged that he had submitted an affidavit with evidence against Hacking in his case, which Brown and the state court judges inappropriately excluded. He contended that this action limited his ability to contest the state court decisions and amounted to a knowing violation of his rights to free speech, due process, and equal protection. In connection with this claim, Covert requested the same injunctive relief as Count One.

In Count Three, Covert alleged defamation, injurious falsehood, and intentional infliction of emotional distress against Hacking. He contended that Hacking was causing him ongoing harm by spreading false information and continuing to manage the defamatory Facebook page at issue in the underlying state court case. As relief, Covert requested, among other things, lost wages and punitive damages.

The magistrate judge recommended denying Covert's IFP motion and dismissing his amended complaint under 28 U.S.C.

§ 1915(e). As relevant here, the magistrate judge found that the *Rooker-Feldman* doctrine deprived the court of jurisdiction to consider all three of Covert’s claims because he sought review of the underlying state court judgment.

Covert objected to the magistrate judge’s recommendation and attempted to file a second amended complaint with nearly 300 pages of supporting evidence. The district judge thereafter issued an order striking Covert’s second amended complaint and adopting the magistrate judge’s recommendation, thereby dismissing the operative first amended complaint for lack of jurisdiction.¹

This appeal followed.

II. STANDARD OF REVIEW

We review de novo a district court’s determination that it lacks subject matter jurisdiction over a case based upon the principles of the *Rooker-Feldman* doctrine. *Behr v. Campbell*, 8 F.4th 1206, 1209 (11th Cir. 2021).

III. DISCUSSION

The *Rooker-Feldman* doctrine precludes a district court from exercising subject matter jurisdiction over “cases brought by

¹ On appeal, Covert appears to take issue with the district judge’s analysis of the magistrate judge’s recommendation and his objections thereto. Specifically, Covert contends that the district judge failed to address his filed objections, improperly disregarded his supplemental evidence, and conflated the frivolity and plausibility standards. We discern no error from the record and decline to further discuss these arguments.

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state-court losers complaining of injuries caused by state-court judgments rendered before the district court proceedings commenced and inviting district court review and rejection of those judgments.” *T.M. v. Univ. of Md. Med. Sys. Corp.*, 146 S. Ct. 1739, 1744 (2026) (quoting *Exxon Mobil Corp. v. Saudi Basic Indus. Corp.*, 544 U.S. 280, 284 (2005)). *Rooker-Feldman* “does not prioritize form over substance.” *Behr*, 8 F.4th at 1211. Rather, the doctrine “bars all appeals of state court judgments—whether the plaintiff admits to filing a direct appeal of the judgment or tries to call the appeal something else.” *Id.*

In this appeal, Covert argues that the district court misapplied *Rooker-Feldman* to conclude that it lacked subject matter jurisdiction over his three claims. After a careful review of the district court’s analysis, we agree with the district court that the *Rooker-Feldman* doctrine bars Counts One and Two of Covert’s amended complaint, but we disagree as to Count Three.

In pursuing Counts One and Two in federal court, Covert was essentially requesting that the district court overturn the state court’s judgment. While Covert appears to argue that he sought only prospective declaratory relief for the alleged constitutional violations, the substance of his request was to enjoin enforcement of the state court judgment requiring him to pay Hacking’s attorney fees. *See id.* Because his claimed injuries arose from the state court judgment itself, the district court would be required to review and reject that judgment to award Covert his requested relief. As such,

Counts One and Two fall within the “narrow ground occupied by *Rooker-Feldman*.” *Exxon Mobil Corp.*, 544 U.S. at 284.

Count Three is different. The injuries Covert alleged in that count were not from the state court judgment itself, but instead, were from Hacking’s alleged unlawful acts that prompted the filing of Covert’s initial lawsuit. While Covert might be seeking to relitigate his defamation, injurious-falsehood, and intentional-infliction-of-emotional-distress claims that were already resolved in state court, doing so is not barred by *Rooker-Feldman*. See *Behr*, 8 F.4th at 1210 (“District courts do not lose subject matter jurisdiction over a claim simply because a party attempts to litigate in federal court a matter previously litigated in state court.” (citation modified)).

We note that “[o]ther preclusion and abstention doctrines remain alive and well,” and we leave to the district court to determine in the first instance whether Count Three is subject to dismissal on some other basis. *Id.* at 1214; see *Exxon Mobil Corp.*, 544 U.S. at 293 (“If a federal plaintiff presents some independent claim, albeit one that denies a legal conclusion that a state court has reached in a case to which he was a party, then there is jurisdiction and state law determines whether the defendant prevails under principles of preclusion.” (citation modified)).

IV. CONCLUSION

We **AFFIRM IN PART, REVERSE IN PART**, and **VACATE IN PART** the district court’s order dismissing Covert’s amended complaint. We **AFFIRM** the dismissal of Counts One and

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Two but **REVERSE** the court's determination that the *Rooker-Feldman* doctrine strips it of jurisdiction to consider Count Three. We therefore **VACATE** the dismissal of Count Three and **REMAND** this case for further proceedings consistent with this opinion.