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Our state has gotten more free

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While modern conservatism in America brings together a number of discrete groups, interests, and priorities, one of its unifying themes is maximizing freedom — by which conservatives mean maximizing the right of individuals, families, and private associations to make their own decisions rather than having them overruled by government coercion.

Applying this principle can be challenging. To limit is not to extinguish, for example. The vast majority of conservatives accept that government can and should intervene in private affairs when required to protect the rights to life, liberty, and property. Because those violations aren't always easy to detect, or to adjudicate in court, conservatives accept that regulation may be needed (in the case of combatting air pollution or communicable disease, for example).

Moreover, applying the freedom principle is complicated by differing definitions of terms. Some say it clearly includes the right of women to terminate pregnancies. Others argue that both the mother and the unborn child have rights that merit government protection.

Complexities aside, maximizing freedom is a core conservative goal. Over the past 10 years of largely conservative governance in North Carolina, we have made significant progress toward that goal.

For starters, when government collects only the tax revenue required to fund core services and otherwise keeps its hands out of our pockets, that leaves us freer both to take care of our families and to support the enterprises and causes that best reflect our values. Thanks to fiscal restraint and a series of tax reforms, North Carolina now ranks 10th in the nation in tax climate, according to the Tax Foundation, up from 34th as recently as 2014.

Another legislative priority since 2010 has been lightening North Carolina's regulatory burden. Lawmakers have repealed or rewritten many regulations. They have also changed the system itself, requiring state agencies to review old rules on a regular basis.

Combining both fiscal and regulatory measures, the Frasier Institute's Economic Freedom of North America index now ranks North Carolina 11th in the nation, up from 19th in 2010.

Even in areas where government must by constitutional design or practical considerations play a significant role, such as education, conservatives generally argue that those who receive public services should be allowed to choose the provider that best meets their needs. We dislike monopolies here for precisely the same reasons we dislike monopolies in other sectors.

Since 2010, North Carolina has promoted choice and competition in education by removing a statewide cap on charter schools and giving students with special needs or modest incomes direct aid to attend the schools of their choice.

On the Cato Institute's index of educational freedom, North Carolina ranks 6th in the nation, up from 21st as recently as 2012. Moreover, an increasing share of North Carolinians are making use of alternative arrangements. Our state ranks 9th in the nation in the share of K-12 students enrolled in an option other than district-run public schools.

Of course, not all indicators show such gains in freedom. North Carolina still licenses too many occupations, keeping workers from boosting their incomes and entrepreneurs from starting new businesses. We have not made enough progress in breaking up health-care monopolies. And there are too many governmental rules still on the books that do not deliver real-world benefits greater than their all-too-real costs.

Nevertheless, I think North Carolina conservatives should be pleased with the overall trajectory. Our state is a much-freer place than it was a decade ago.

Of course, I recognize that other North Carolinians may be looking at these same indicators and cringing. They think our taxes ought to be higher, and more elaborately designed to favor some sectors or behaviors over others. They think state government (and many local governments) are underfinanced. They think a lot more tax money would make education and other services a lot better. And many reject the very definition of freedom I'm using here, the absence of government restraint.

By all means, let's continue having that conversation. Fortunately, we are all free to do so.