

Commentary: To keep Florida free, hold elected officials accountable

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As any Floridian will tell you, the Sunshine State is a great place to live and raise a family.

Just in case we needed any further proof, a new study by the Cato Institute found that Florida is the freest state in the country, earning the top spot thanks to our low taxes and high degree of labor and educational freedom.

To ensure we remain on this path, we must support policies that expand freedom and prosperity. At Americans for Prosperity (AFP), we believe that the best way to do this is to support anyone — regardless of political party — who advances policies that create a society grounded in equal rights and mutual benefit.

Over the past year, AFP was proud to support Senate Bill 192, bipartisan legislation that will improve the way our state collects criminal justice data and shares this critical information across counties and courts.

According to Florida TaxWatch and the Reason Foundation, Florida incarcerates 96,000 inmates at an annual cost of nearly \$2.4 billion a year. Besides the high cost to the taxpayer, about 25 percent of all inmates released from incarceration return to prison within three years.

The new law will increase openness and transparency in our criminal justice system by helping policymakers better identify criminals in the state. This is the first step in moving Florida toward embracing even more evidence-based criminal justice reform initiatives that make better use of our tax dollars while also keeping our communities safe. There is reason to believe this approach works because we can look to other states, including neighboring Georgia, where crime rates and imprisonment rates have both gone down in recent years after implementing similar reforms.

AFP has also worked with both political parties to remove barriers of opportunity by reducing Florida's occupational licensing laws. According to the Institute for Justice, a public interest law firm, Florida's occupational licensing laws are among the most restrictive in the nation.

That's why in 2017 our army of grassroots activists and volunteers made phone calls and took to social media to mobilize support for a measure that would have exempted hair braiders, manicurists, makeup artists and others from having to pay a registration fee to practice their trade. Unfortunately, the legislation wasn't enacted. But as more and more people learn about our state's heavy-handed occupational licensing laws that prevent folks from being able to work, support is growing across the ideological spectrum to make changes.

Besides bipartisan criminal justice and occupational licensing reforms, we are also committed to rooting out corporate welfare that allows the well-connected to receive generous taxpayer handouts.

Ending the practice of having government pick winners and losers is another bipartisan cause. We mobilized our activists to shine a spotlight on the Enterprise Florida Institute (EFI) — a government slush fund for public-private economic development. We thanked lawmakers who supported increased transparency, including state Sen. Jose Javier Rodriguez, a Miami-Dade Democrat, for his support.

Looking ahead, lawmakers should know that AFP will continue to work with anyone who wants to knock down barriers to opportunity and work toward building a freer Florida — regardless of party affiliation.

Things in Florida are going well, but to keep things moving along in the right direction, it is absolutely vital that we hold our elected officials accountable. It's the only way to ensure we remain on top and set the example for others to follow.