



U.S. Drops in Human Freedom Index; Ranks Behind Ex-communist Nations

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In the 1992 book *The End of History and the Last Man*, philosopher Francis Fukuyama posited that “liberal democracy” would become the world’s unassailable, default norm. Since then, many would argue, we’ve gotten much *liberalism* and the appearance of democracy, but the substance doesn’t match the style. And a recent study of liberty in the world vindicates that claim.

In fact, finds the Cato Institute’s latest edition of the Human Freedom Index, after reaching a high point in 2007 (just before the Obama years, do note), worldwide freedom had been in steady decline. But that has changed:

It entered *steep* decline with the Covid-19 situation in 2020.

Yet even in this world of diminished liberty in which capturing a good freedom ranking is easier, the United States has lost ground relative to other nations. It now ranks only 23rd, behind countries such as Germany, Canada, and Britain, and former communist lands such as Latvia and Estonia. America had been sixth in the world in the year 2000.

The good news is that our nation still ranks seventh in economic freedom (EF) — though, again, the context is a world in which liberty in general has contracted.

Meanwhile, another study, the Fraser Institute’s Economic Freedom of North America (EFNA), provided EF data on our states as well. Florida captured the first spot while, in a finding surprising to many, California was not the caboose.

It ranked 49th.

New York was the absolute worst.

This being said, and as for freedom generally, Cato’s Human Freedom Index 2022 doesn’t entirely tell the tale, as its liberty assessment is quantitative but perhaps not perfectly qualitative. More on this later.

The Independent Institute reported on the story last Wednesday, writing:

“Most areas of freedom fell, including significant declines in the rule of law and freedom of movement, expression, association and assembly, and freedom to trade. Based on that coverage, 94.3 percent of the world’s population lives in jurisdictions that saw a fall in human freedom from 2019 to 2020,” the report concluded.

The “precipitous descent in 2020 affected every region of the world, including rich and poor countries and democracies and nondemocracies, setting global freedom to a level far below what it was in 2000, previously the lowest point in the past two decades,” it continued.

The significant decline is attributed to government policies enacted in response to the coronavirus pandemic.

“There can be no doubt that the coronavirus pandemic was calamitous for overall human freedom,” the report asserted. “The key question in future years is whether governments will fully reverse COVID-19 related restrictions on freedom as the pandemic moderates or whether some will continue to exert the additional control and spending power they have appropriated to themselves during the pandemic.”

The Fraser Institute’s ... [EFNA] ... similarly revealed that government COVID-19 policies had led to a significant decline in freedom....

As for country rankings, Cato tells us:

The countries that took the top 10 places, in order, were Switzerland, New Zealand, Estonia, Denmark, Ireland, Sweden, Iceland, Finland, Netherlands, and Luxembourg. Selected jurisdictions rank as follows: Canada (13), Taiwan (14), Japan (16), Germany (18), United Kingdom (20), United States (23), South Korea (30), Chile (32), France (42), Argentina (74), South Africa (77), Brazil (80), Ukraine (89), Mexico (98), India (112), Russia (119), Nigeria (124), Turkey (130), China (152), Saudi Arabia (159), Iran (162), Venezuela (163), and Syria (165).

Cato adds that in “a comparison of the jurisdictions for which we have the same data available since 2000, a high point for freedom occurred in 2007, which then saw a steady decline through 2019, a period during which 78.6 percent of the world’s population experienced a fall in freedom.”

As for our states, as *The Hill* wrote earlier this month, reporting on the EFNA, “Florida ranked the most economically free, followed by New Hampshire, South Dakota and a tie between Texas and Tennessee. California ranked 49th, besting only New York.”

While these freedom reports are valuable resources for understanding the world’s level of liberty, as mentioned earlier, their qualitative judgments may not be ideal.

To elaborate, I’ll note that a law generally (at least) is the removal of a freedom or, to be precise, is the limiting of consequence-free exercise of will. This is because it states that there’s

something you mustn't or must do. Of course, though, certain exercises of free will must be squelched, such as the choice to commit murder, rape, or theft. Yet this raises the question: What should be suppressed, and how is this decision made?

Consider that, for example, Cato states that among its liberty-measurement criteria is "the freedom of individuals to establish same-sex relationships." Other entities may also include "abortion rights" as a criterion. But whether these measures are valid depends on the answer to this question: Should same-sex relationships or abortion be prohibited, discouraged, tolerated, or facilitated?

We can't know this without settling something philosopher G.K. Chesterton addressed in his 1905 book *Heretics*. "Every one of the popular modern phrases and ideals is a dodge in order to shirk the problem of what is good," he wrote. He then, aside from mentioning the modern ideals of "progress" and "education," pointed out that even talk of "liberty" is such a dodge.

"The modern man says, 'Let us leave all these arbitrary standards and embrace liberty,'" Chesterton continued. "This is, logically rendered, 'Let us not decide what is good, but let it be considered good not to decide it.'"

To put it simply, we can't know if it's good or not to have few or many laws if we don't know what "good" (the Truth) is; and while many or few we want only *good* laws, we can't know what they might be unless we know what good is.

Note here that I sent the above Chesterton passage to a sexual devolutionary activist and columnist who inveighed against legislation limiting drag-queen performances, and he wrote back, "Who decides what is good, though? You?"

It's a common but now quite stale response. Western civilization was not created by people confused about what's good — and it won't be sustained by those who are. If we cannot or will not determine what is good, we will inevitably end up with what is bad.