

The OKLAHOMAN

"Freedom" ranking is good news for Oklahoma

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OKLAHOMA typically lands at the lower end of 50-state rankings on a host of issues, so it's worth noting those occasions when the opposite occurs. The 2016 edition of the libertarian Cato Institute's "Freedom in the 50 States" report ranks Oklahoma third-best for overall freedom.

The report ranks states "based on how their policies promote freedom in the fiscal, regulatory, and personal realms." The authors' libertarian viewpoint leads them to emphasize some issues that one would expect (such as supporting lower levels of taxation and light regulation), but also more controversial policies (such as the institute's support for marijuana legalization and gambling).

Even so, there's much to like in the report.

For one thing, Oklahoma was the "most improved state for the 2000–2014 period." In 2000, Oklahoma ranked 32nd out of 50 states in the institute's report. The surge to third in such a relatively short period is remarkable.

Among other things, the Cato authors praise Oklahoma's "light" land-use regulation and its "excellent" labor law, which includes "a right-to-work law, no state-level minimum wage, a federally consistent anti-discrimination law, and lighter workers' compensation mandates than most states." The authors note Oklahoma's occupational licensing "has grown over time, but not as much as in most other states."

The report's authors declare Oklahoma's court system "is relatively good, due to tort reforms" enacted through the years. They highlighted Oklahoma's support for educational freedom, citing the Lindsey Nicole Henry Scholarships for Students with Disabilities Program Act, which allows parents to use state funds to send children with special needs to private schools; the state tax break for contributions to private scholarship funds; and the "virtually unregulated" status of homeschooling and private schools.

The report also shows further improvement is still possible, despite Oklahoma's high ranking. The authors note that Oklahoma's incarceration rate, "adjusted for the crime rate, is more than a standard deviation higher than the national average." They indicate that state penalties for certain drug crimes are overly harsh, citing a "two-year mandatory minimum" for "small-scale cultivation" as an example.

The report also notes, “For a state without a government liquor monopoly, Oklahoma does poorly on alcohol freedom. It has statewide blue laws, a happy hour ban, a total ban on direct wine shipment, and a ban on wine and spirits in grocery stores.”

Among the recommendations offered by the report's authors are a call to reduce Oklahoma's government payroll and cut spending “in areas well out of line with national averages” as well as legalizing wine and spirits in grocery stores. While the report doesn't expressly say it, continued measures to increase parental choice in education would also benefit the state greatly.

An effort to revise Oklahoma's liquor laws awaits a public vote in November, as do measures reducing some criminal penalties, so some of Cato's recommendations may be partially addressed in short order.

Notably, many policy changes that helped boost Oklahoma's ranking so dramatically since 2000 were enacted after Republicans won control of the Oklahoma House of Representatives, and especially after Republicans won full control of the Legislature and the governorship.

More recently, legislative Republicans have been far more timid, with some GOP lawmakers openly resistant to conservative reforms. The Cato report shows the benefit of pursuing a serious, substantive agenda. And it highlights how such an agenda can foster dramatic improvement over time.