



FREE MINDS AND FREE MARKETS

On Independence Day, Find Common Ground Over Freedom

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On Independence Day, we celebrate ejecting an obnoxious government and replacing it with a less authoritarian regime somewhat constrained by the memory of its predecessor's fate. Treason is the reason for the season, after all! The resulting improvements were incomplete and not fully enjoyed by everybody (human creations are imperfect), but they were real gains, nevertheless. Roughly two and a half centuries on, how well is the American experiment protecting our liberty?

The Rattler is a weekly newsletter from J.D. Tuccille. If you care about government overreach and tangible threats to everyday liberty, this is for you.

Threatened Freedom

"A majority (55%) of Americans are very concerned that their fundamental rights and freedoms are under threat – with Republicans (63%) being somewhat more likely than Democrats (53%) or independents (51%) to feel this way," according to a Monmouth University [June 20](#). "Another 29% of the general public is somewhat concerned about threats to their rights and about 1 in 6 is either not too (11%) or not at all (5%) concerned."

That's concerning in a nation founded on the principle "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" and "that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government." That the bewigged and bemusketed founders were serious is clear in the existence of Independence Day.

Liberty is Still a Priority

Nobody is entirely consistent, of course, but it's impressive how much Americans prioritize liberty. With the exception of a very brief period after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, year after year majorities of respondents told Gallup pollsters "the government should take steps to prevent

additional acts of terrorism but not if those steps would violate your basic civil liberties" (and that short-lived "screw civil liberties" plurality enjoyed only a 2 percent advantage).

In 2013, the University of Chicago's NORC (formerly the National Opinion Research Center) noted that "Public support for civil liberties has risen over the last 40 years.... There have been appreciable increases in support for allowing public speeches, books in libraries, and college teaching for almost all groups."

But valuing something doesn't mean it's being respected. Even as Americans elevate freedom over other concerns, they believe government officials don't share their values.

"A majority of Americans report that the government's goal of protecting the rights and freedoms of U.S. citizens is more important than the goal of making sure that U.S. citizens are safe from being harmed by terrorists," the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research reported in 2020. "However, the data reveal a downward trend since 2011 in the percentage of Americans who think the government is doing a good job protecting certain rights and freedoms, and a majority now feels the government is doing a poor job protecting the right to privacy."

That was written the year government officials' favorite excuse for ignoring protections for civil liberties morphed from "terrorists" to "viruses." But public preferences didn't really budge.

"Americans for Prosperity, in conjunction with YouGov, released key findings and full crosstabs from a new survey that measures the U.S. general public's attitudes on the protection of their civil liberties since the start of the pandemic," according to a March 2022 poll. "On every question asking about a specific civil liberty, more people feel that their civil liberties are less secure since the start of the pandemic than more secure."

The freedom to protest and to voice opinions were big losers, with pluralities saying both had eroded. That's no surprise after revelations about government officials leaning on social media to stifle dissent.

Freedom Really Is Eroding

Interestingly, the Cato Institute's *Freedom in the 50 States* index, which has generally been upbeat about growing respect for personal freedom in many states in recent years, tracks a decline in liberty related to pandemic policies. "We hope that the small dip in 2019 is merely noise in a larger trend," its authors warn in the most recent edition. "However, a growing paternalistic mindset, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and often characterized by excessive deference to 'experts,' could spell trouble ahead."

Economic freedom in the U.S. has followed a less-consistent road, though it's been in decline since before the pandemic, according to *Freedom in the 50 States*. "We worry that the recent downward dip could be a sign of a future trend toward greater interventionism in the economy—and a greater barrier to economic recovery in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic."

"The U.S. economy faces enormous challenges," agrees the Heritage Foundation's *Index of Economic Freedom*, which this year downgraded the United States yet again. "Big-government policies have eroded limits on government, public spending continues to rise, and the regulatory burden on business has increased."

Of course, the *Index of Economic Freedom* downgraded the whole planet. "Regrettably, the global average economic freedom score has fallen from the previous year's 60.0 to 59.3—the lowest it has been over the past two decades," adds the 2023 edition.

That's true across the board. Multiple assessments from organizations including *The Economist* and Freedom House charge governments with exploiting public health fears to attack individual liberty.

"In the year 2020, 94 percent of the world's population saw a fall in its freedom compared to the year before," Ian Vásquez, one of the authors of the *Human Freedom Index*, published by America's Cato Institute and Canada's Fraser Institute, wrote earlier this year. "The annual Human Freedom Index, released today by the Cato Institute and the Fraser Institute, documents how the Covid-19 pandemic was a catastrophe for human freedom."

The Control-Freak Constituency

Government isn't the only problem, unfortunately. A recent Cato Institute survey found 29 percent of younger adults supportive of government surveillance cameras in their own homes. And eroding support for respecting free speech rights of people with whom we disagree has become a public concern. Psychologist Clay Routledge of the Archbridge Institute recently told me he sees "a very real trend of Americans, and especially younger generations of Americans, prioritizing security over freedom."

And yet, *Freedom in the 50 States* says "people are moving to freer states." Many Americans still cherish freedom. Maybe part of the problem lies in too many people's desire to protect only the liberties they care about and to hell with those valued by their political opponents.

"While both Republicans and Democrats express concern about risks to their freedoms, the specific types of rights they worry about losing are very different," Monmouth commented about that recent survey. "Among Republicans, 38% say their freedom of speech or First Amendment rights are under threat and an identical 38% say the same about their Second Amendment right to bear arms.... Democrats, on the other hand are most concerned with restrictions to abortion access along with other women's rights (36%)."

So, majorities of Americans agree that government doesn't respect their freedom. Meanwhile, the security state and overbearing authorities are becoming normalized for some. Maybe, while they still have sufficient numbers to do so, those who care about freedom should stop worrying about *which* liberties are worth defending, and find common ground over liberty itself, the right to make our own choices and guide our own lives. After all, that's what gave us Independence Day to begin with.

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