

The Wilson Times

Our Opinion: Is freedom on the rise in N.C.? Survey says yes

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North Carolina is making slow but steady gains in economic and personal liberty, according to the Cato Institute's 2016 survey of freedom in the 50 states.

The Tar Heel State is ranked 19th for overall freedom, up from 23rd. But lackluster scores in some segments of the index show there's plenty of room for improvement — if you subscribe to the libertarian think tank's small-government and individual rights philosophy, that is.

Our state is in the bottom third (37th place) for occupational freedom, owing largely to the proliferation of occupational licensing boards that regulate all manner of businesses and services. North Carolina requires a state license to go to work in more than 700 fields, from medicine and law to those who become auctioneers, polygraph examiners, ginseng dealers, naturopaths and African hair braiders.

We take a centrist, common-sense view here. The state has a legitimate interest in regulating doctors, lawyers, insurance agents and bankers, but there are far too many licensing boards. They serve as a barrier to entry for various and sundry professions, and they improperly establish themselves as an arbiter for private disputes best left to the free market and the civil courts. A hairdresser need not be subject to a state disciplinary hearing for giving a bad haircut. Word of mouth ought to suffice.

North Carolina ranks 41st in Cato's index for victimless crimes, which the group describes as "individual actions that harm no one." In the think tank's view of limited government and maximum personal freedom, states shouldn't pass laws to limit free choice and protect people from themselves.

Case in point: We're ranked 49th for travel freedom due to seat belt and motorcycle helmet requirements, mandatory auto insurance coverage and a ban on drivers' cellphone use. Advocates of these laws point to harm reduction and public safety, while ideological purists believe whether to buckle up, strap on a helmet or put down the phone should remain individual choices.

The issue isn't as clear-cut as Cato would like to believe. That distracted driver tapping away on his or her smartphone could plow into a fellow motorist, depriving him or her of liberty, health and life. We're all for personal freedom, but we don't want to encourage reckless behavior that endangers others.

We're ranked dead-last in miscellaneous regulatory freedom, down to 50th from 48th, due to regulations governing hospitals, auto insurance and homeowners' insurance. North Carolina law requires hospitals to obtain government permission in the form of a certificate of need before opening their doors.

Critics say that carves out monopolies, suppresses competition and keeps prices artificially high, but advocates for public hospitals say CONs are necessary to preserve their patient base since they bear the cost of charitable care and must offset those losses with revenue.

Overall, North Carolina ranks 13th in personal freedom, 17th in fiscal freedom and 26th in regulatory freedom. Not too shabby.

Who's the freest of them all? According to the Cato Institute, it's New Hampshire — whose motto is, fittingly, "Live Free or Die." In the Southeast, the think tank says Tennessee enjoys the most freedom; it's ranked sixth overall in the nation.

The Cato report includes a few policy recommendations for North Carolina: Cut spending on hospitals, trim individual income taxes, eliminate insurance rate regulations and eliminate the state monopoly on liquor sales.

Cato's rankings are sure to rankle both conservatives and liberals — the former because the freedom to marry and drug decriminalization are counted as core personal liberty issues and the latter because the think tank wants to deregulate the health and financial sectors, slash taxes and shrink government.

Democrats say their tolerance and understanding on social issues make their party the leader in freedom, while Republicans tout economic liberty and limited government as the ultimate measures of freedom.

Nearly everyone supports freedom as an abstract concept, but as this polarizing study shows, the devil's in the details.