

Tennessee conservative? You bet! Volunteer State found to be most conservative and among 'most free' in the U.S.

Clint Cooper

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For the third year in a row, Tennessee is fourth in the country in the Cato Institute's new ranking of "Freedom in the 50 States."

Every year since 2000, the libertarian policy institute has released an index of the combined personal and economic freedom in individual states.

Tennessee has been as high as third on the list and as low as seventh but is fourth in 2021 — based on scores as of Jan. 1, 2020 — for the 11th time.

New Hampshire, Florida and Nevada, respectively, are ahead of the Volunteer State in the rankings. New York is No. 50 on the list.

We believe freedom goes hand in hand with smaller government, fewer taxes and less regulation, and Cato's numbers seem to bear that out. Tennessee's fiscal policies (covering taxes, government employment, spending, debt and fiscal decentralization) and economic freedom (including fiscal and regulatory policy) are second in the country behind Florida in both sub-categories of Cato's list.

The state does not have an income tax, and state- and local-level taxes — as of 2020 — were 4.1% and 2.5% of adjusted personal income. Both percentages are below the national average.

Although it seems the size of government is always growing, government employment in Tennessee is only 10.2% of private employment, and government consumption and investment is low at 9.1% of income and has been falling for a decade.

The state is also in the top 10 in the country for labor-market freedom with a right-to-work law (which voters may be given a chance to enshrine in the constitution in the November 2022 election), no minimum wage and relaxed workers' compensation rules.

In other sub-categories, Tennessee is tied with 11 states for the top spot in the country for marriage freedom (the ability for couples to enter into private contracts — both civil unions or marriage), is tied with 17 states for No. 1 in cable and telecom laws (telecommunications

deregulation and cable franchising) and is eighth in tobacco laws (including taxes on tobacco, smoking bans, internet bans and vending machine regulations).

The rankings place the state at only 39th (up from 41st in 2019) in personal freedom, which encompasses a variety of categories including victimless crimes, guns, tobacco and education. For instance, it is 43rd (and falling) in asset forfeiture, despite an improvement in that law sponsored and passed in the last several years by the late state Rep. Mike Carter, 47th in gambling restrictions and 46th in cannabis laws.

Tennessee improved from 2019 in regulatory policy (moving from 17th to 16th), occupational freedom (39th to 38th), health insurance (25th to 23rd) and campaign finance (16th to 15th).

The survey's analysis for the state also noted changes in 2021 of the enactment of a very limited medical marijuana law and the passage of permitless handgun carry. It also said the presence of Smith & Wesson (which announced in September it would move its headquarters to Maryville in 2023) might be helpful in the gun control sub-category.

The analysis also details policy recommendations, and for Tennessee it suggests, in fiscal matters, separating spending and tax committees in the legislature, a reform it says has been shown to correspond to lower spending over time, and cutting the state's high sales tax rate. In regulatory matters, it suggests repealing the price-gouging law and all minimum-markup laws, and in personal matters, it suggests deregulating private schools and home schools by removing mandatory approval and teacher licensing for private schools and relaxing annual notification requirements for homeschoolers.

We don't necessarily go along with all those recommendations, sales tax being the state's primary form of income (and keeping the stay solvent during the recession caused by the COVID-19 shutdowns last year), and some regulation needed for private schools and home schools.

Tennessee also finished tops in the country in conservative policy in ratings of state legislatures released recently by the American Conservative Union (ACU) Foundation. In bills rated by the ACU, the legislature scored a 72 in 2021. The Senate had a rating of 78 and the House a 71, both individually also No. 1 in the country. The state's all-time rating of 74 also easily outdistances No. 2 Florida (67) and No. 3 North Carolina (66) for the most conservative in the country.

Among Hamilton County's legislative delegation, Reps. Robin Smith, R-Hixson, and Esther Helton, R-East Ridge, had the most conservative voting records across 42 votes in 2021 with a rating of 86 (the two voting the same on every issue). Sen. Bo Watson, R-Hixson, had a rating of 85 across 39 votes, followed by Rep. Patsy Hazlewood, R-Signal Mountain, 82 across 39 votes, Sen. Todd Gardenhire, R-Chattanooga, 73 across 37 votes, and Rep. Yusuf Hakeem, D-Chattanooga, 33 across 42 votes.

Gardenhire had the lowest ACU score among Republicans in the legislature and even ranked below one Democrat.

Lifetime, though, Gardenhire had an 82 rating, higher than Hazlewood's 80 and Hakeem's 36, but below Smith's and Helton's 85s and Watson's 87.

The ratings did not include Mike Carter, who died in May.