

Cato Institute offers suggestions to return Pennsylvania to ranks of freest states in the U.S.

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It's probably safe to assume that in the state where the Liberty Bell resides and the nation's first capital once was located, the concept of freedom is an integral part of Pennsylvania's identity.

A decade ago, Pennsylvania could be counted among the 10 freest states in the nation, according to the Cato Institute's annual rankings. But then the state began a decline that has landed it at 20th place in the latest rankings.

The institute, a think tank devoted to the principles of individual liberty, limited government and free markets, periodically releases its "**Freedom in the 50 States**" report, and the latest edition is updated with data through 2016.

Quantifying freedom is no simple task. To compile the rankings, the study's authors collected dozens of data points across three main subdivisions – fiscal policy, regulatory policy and personal freedom.

"We ground our conception of freedom on an individual rights framework," the report's authors, William Ruger and Jason Sorens, wrote. "In our view, individuals should be allowed to dispose of their lives, liberties and property as they see fit, so long as they do not infringe on the rights of others."

By the authors' reckoning, Pennsylvania is located in a region of the country where freedom is particularly limited compared to the rest of the nation. New York finished 50th in the rankings, New Jersey 47th, Delaware 43rd, West Virginia 34th and Ohio 25th.

The study attributes Pennsylvania's relative success in large part to having a better tax structure than those states.

"Fiscal policy is the dimension where Pennsylvania has done best," they wrote. "Pennsylvania's tax burden is about average, but the state is a bit more fiscally decentralized than average, with local governments making up a larger share of the total tax take. The tax burden has declined slightly since 2000. Pennsylvanians have ample choice of local government, with more than 4.4 effective competing jurisdictions per 100 square miles."

The Cato analysis offers a number of areas where Pennsylvania is badly lagging, suggesting that these are opportunities for the state to grant its residents greater freedom. Among the weaker sub-rankings were:

- 43rd in marriage freedom – “the ability for couples to enter into private contracts, both civil unions or marriage”
- 47th in lawsuit freedom – how “plaintiff-friendly each state's civil liability system is.”
- 49th in alcohol freedom – restrictions on distribution, taxes and other limitations related to drinking

“Pennsylvania is one of the worst states for alcohol freedom,” Ruger and Sorens wrote. “A notoriously inefficient state bureaucracy monopolizes wine and spirits. Wine mark-ups are especially high, and even beer is prohibited in grocery stores. However, direct wine shipments were legalized in 2016.”

There were some bright spots for Pennsylvania, too:

- 12th in gun rights
- 10th in gaming freedom
- Tied for first in campaign finance freedom

“Gun rights are much better respected than in many other states, with carry licenses affordable and not terribly restricted, all Class III weapons legal, and a right to defend oneself in public, legally recognized in 2011,” the authors wrote. “Since legalizing casinos in 2007, Pennsylvania has risen to become one of the best states in the country for gambling liberty (except for home poker games).”

The study offers a number of suggestions to increase freedom in Pennsylvania. The authors propose that lawmakers break up the state-run liquor store system, eliminate partisan judicial elections to the state Supreme Court, and reform civil liability laws.

“[The state should] reduce spending, especially on parking lots, public buildings, and employee retirement benefits, which are high by national standards,” the report says. “Reduce numerous minor taxes that are relatively high by national standards.”