

ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

What's right (and wrong) about California: How 14 rankings score the state

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You can't improve much if you don't know your own strengths and weaknesses.

So with a new year upon us, let's review how California performed in 2018 — as measured by a selection of rankings that serve our national thirst to debate who's No. 1 and who's dead last.

I filled my trusty spreadsheet with 14 state-by-state rankings on various quality-of-life subjects. I used different sources for each ranking to keep biases to a minimum.

When I averaged these rankings for each state, I found California with a middle-of-the-pack score — No. 27 out of the 50 states, smack between Kansas and Missouri. Not bad. Not great.

Tops by my math were New Hampshire, Utah and Washington. Worst? Louisiana, Mississippi, and West Virginia. (Since many of you will want to know: California's economic arch-rival Texas was No. 19.)

Rankings for California really varied, which suggests the state — and I don't just mean government — is really good at some stuff and fairly poor at other stuff.

Only five states had more wildly gyrating rankings than California — Hawaii, Vermont, Alaska, Nevada and Connecticut — when I applied standard deviation math to the 14 ranking results. It's what I'd call a quasi-coastal crowd.

This geeky volatility measurement found that rankings were most consistent for Pennsylvania, Wisconsin, and Montana. This is a decidedly a middle-America grouping.

The variance in how California scored is certainly food for thought about how the state can better itself. So, here's how 14 rankings graded California, from what you could say are the state's best attributes to its worst.

1. Worker rights: Oxfam gave California its best grade, a No. 2 ranking behind Washington and just ahead of Massachusetts. It's not surprising for a pro-labor state that make some bosses say it's nearly impossible to fire somebody. Worst place to work, Oxfam says? Virginia, Mississippi and Alabama.

2. Economic strength: 24/7 Wall Street gave California a lofty No. 8 ranking, crediting its innovative workplace culture for creating lots of jobs and huge wealth. The best economies, to 24/7 Wall Street's eyes, were in Colorado, Utah, and Massachusetts. Worst? West Virginia, Alaska and Louisiana.

3. Raising families: WalletHub gave California a No. 10 ranking for plenty to do and see, which outweighed high costs. Top states for child-rearing were Massachusetts, Minnesota and New Hampshire. Worst? New Mexico, Mississippi and Alabama.

4. Being a patient: United Health Foundation's yardstick scored California's healthcare 12th best for its relatively broad availability and higher quality of care. Top spots to be sick were Hawaii, Massachusetts and Connecticut. Worst? Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama.

5. Livability: Gallup's year-round polling on social and economic issues gave California a No. 14 ranking. Top places for quality of life by this scorecard were South Dakota, Vermont and Hawaii. Worst? West Virginia, Louisiana and Arkansas.

6. Job growth: As of November, the Bureau of Labor Statistics employment figures showed California with the 20th best job creation on a percentage basis. Best for new employment was Nevada, Arizona and Wyoming. Worst job markets? Vermont, Alaska and West Virginia.

7. Personal freedom: The Cato Institute, often a harsh critic of the state, gave California a No. 23 ranking for laws friendly to the populace. Tops for these freedoms, according to these rankings were Maine, Nevada and New Mexico. Worst? Texas, Alabama and Hawaii.

8. New neighbors: Census data as of July showed California with the 24th fastest population growth on a percentage basis. Tops for new folks was Nevada, Idaho and Utah. Least attractive? West Virginia, Illinois and Alaska.

9. Business climate: If California is great for workers, it makes sense that CNBC would give the state a middling No. 25 ranking as a place from which CEOs want to operate. Most "business-friendly" according to these rankings was Texas then Washington and Utah. Worst? Alaska, Mississippi and West Virginia.

10. Education: US News & World Report gave California a mid-range No. 26 ranking for its challenged K-12 systems and its top-flight higher education. Best for students was Massachusetts then New Jersey and Utah. Worst? New Mexico, Louisiana and South Carolina.

11. Government solvency: George Mason U. economists, known for their conservative leanings, graded the financial health of California's government at No. 42. that's reflection of the state's volatile income streams and sizable long-term obligations. In best monetary shape, by George Mason's standards, were Nebraska, South Dakota, and Tennessee. Biggest risks were in Illinois, Connecticut, and New Jersey.

12 (tie). Taxes: No Californian would be surprised to hear the anti-tax Tax Foundation scored the state California lowly 49th for its lofty government levies and fees — topped only by New Jersey and just ahead of New York. Best places for taxpayers, according to the foundation, were Wyoming, Alaska and South Dakota.

12 (tie). Cost of living: Anybody surprised, Part II? Missouri's tracking of how expensive life is in each state shows California as the second priciest place to live. Hawaii was most expensive, by this math; New York was No. 3. Looking for a bargain? Try the low-cost leaders Mississippi, Oklahoma or Arkansas.

14. Transportation: Recent gas-tax debates did have a universal truth: California roads stink. Bankrate scored the state dead-last at No. 50 for everything transportation-related, just ahead of

Hawaii and Connecticut. Best places to get around, by this yardstick, were in North Dakota, Iowa and Ohio.