



THE PATRIOT POST®

PRO DEO ET LIBERTATE ~ 1776

50 States and the Freedom to Compare

Michael Swartz

August 24, 2018

Consider it a scorecard for government overreach: The Cato Institute this week published its fifth edition of “Freedom in the 50 States.” Since 2009, when study authors William Ruger and Jason Sorens first published their work through George Mason University’s Mercatus Center, the four subsequent editions have expanded on the concept of maximum personal and economic freedom, studying how those numbers compare among the 50 states.

Ruger is now vice president for research and policy at the Charles Koch Institute and vice president for research at the Charles Koch Foundation, as well as an Afghan war veteran; meanwhile, Sorens is an author, lecturer at Dartmouth University, and chairman of the Free State Project, which has enlisted more than 20,000 volunteers to move to New Hampshire and effect political change in a state deemed small enough for such a group of citizens to make an impact.

The term “scorecard” is used literally in the case of this study. Its authors have assigned numerical values and weighted more than 200 factors that they consider as essential to individual freedom, which they defined in the very first edition as “the ability to dispose of one’s own life, liberty, and justly acquired property however one sees fit, so long as one does not coercively infringe on another individual’s ability to do the same.” This year’s winners? Florida, followed by New Hampshire, Indiana, Colorado, and Nevada.

The idea that states are “laboratories of democracy” is very evident in the long-term trends. Since the first rendition of the rankings nearly a decade ago, only New Hampshire among this year’s top five has consistently stayed in the top echelon. Indeed, the “Live Free Or Die” state hasn’t finished below second place. Worth noting on this point: As the study’s authors have refined the data and tweaked their formulas, some states that were ranked highly in the first study nine years ago have slipped in the comparison. Based on this year’s formula, Ruger and Sorens have revisited the numbers for every year going back to 2000 — so a state like Colorado, which ranked second in 2009, now grades out for that year as a more pedestrian 10th using that year’s data with the current formula.

Don’t forget, too, that Colorado is home to the Masterpiece Cakeshop — a First Amendment target of the Liberty-destroying Rainbow Mafia.

The researchers' methodology also reflects the typical conservative vs. progressive duopoly to some extent. Out of this year's top five (which covers data through FY2017), we find three states with a Republican trifecta of control of both legislative houses and the governor's chair, while the other two are mixed. The opposite holds true of the bottom five — three with a trifecta of Democrats (California, Hawaii, and New York), but mixed governance in New Jersey and Vermont. Given the authors' weight on fiscal responsibility and regulatory reform, though, it's no surprise that GOP-dominated states tend to score higher. Our humble shop is based in Tennessee, which we not-so-humbly deem "a model for America." It's a top-10 state in Cato's rankings because of its fiscal conservatism, but is knocked down by a few factors the authors considered detrimental, such as high taxes on alcohol and little legalized gambling.

In order to account for one's personal definition of freedom and the importance of various factors therein, the Cato Institute has set up its Freedom in the 50 States website in such a manner as to allow users to create their own index and reflect their own values and preferences. Those with a more biblical outlook can see what the rankings would look like without the weightings assigned to such things as same-sex marriage laws (1.99%) or with an increase in the 0.12% devoted to homeschooling laws, as examples.

For those Patriots who aren't fortunate enough to live in a top-ranking state — and who can really just drop everything and move? — a helpful feature of each state's summary is a set of policy recommendations. Reviewing the 2016 edition of the study, Reason's Nick Gillespie noted, "Ruger and Sorens make a significant contribution to how states might function as laboratories of democracy and learn from the experiments carried out around the country." What was true two years ago is even more so today: Given the state of government, there are a lot of improvements to be made.