



Which States Are the Freest?

Many Americans are fleeing restrictive jurisdictions and moving to places that respect their liberty.

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Our liberties have taken a beating in recent years, accelerated by governments' enthusiasm for leveraging COVID-19 as an excuse for further tightening control over society. We long ago arrived at the point where newly published assessments of the health of personal and economic freedom elicit wincing before we even read the gloomy summaries. So the arrival of the latest edition of the Cato Institute's *Freedom in the 50 States* is welcome both for its somewhat optimistic take on the future of pandemic-fueled restrictions as well as for the handy guide it offers for people looking to relocate within the United States to places where valued freedoms enjoy protection.

First, let's get the inevitable pain out of the way: "[A]lthough the rights of some have increased significantly in certain areas, for the average American, freedom has declined generally because of federal policy that includes encroachment on policies that states controlled 20 years ago," concede authors William Ruger and Jason Sorens in the introduction to the [print edition](#) (PDF).

Dispiriting caveats are a feature of these assessments, from warnings in *The Economist's Democracy Index 2020* that "democracy has not been in robust health for some time" and "[a]cross the world in 2020, citizens experienced the biggest rollback of individual freedoms ever undertaken by governments during peacetime (and perhaps even in wartime)" to the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance's [caution](#) that "[t]he world is becoming more authoritarian as non-democratic regimes become even more brazen in their repression and many democratic governments suffer from backsliding by adopting their tactics of restricting free speech and weakening the rule of law, exacerbated by what threatens to become a 'new normal' of Covid-19 restrictions." It's wise to have a stiff drink when reading these reports. And remember that their rankings are relative to the moment.

That's especially true of *Freedom in the 50 States* since it grades the states in so many categories involving both personal and economic freedom. It then ranks them based on weights that necessarily are prone to vary depending on individual preferences and priorities.

"[O]ur index of freedom should be understood to represent each state's relative respect for freedom, as reflected in the value enjoyed by the 'average' person who would otherwise be deprived of the freedoms we measure," Ruger and Sorens emphasize. "However, each individual will value different policies differently, and for that reason, again, we encourage readers to apply their own weights and personalize the freedom index at <http://www.freedominthe50states.org>."

A good example of the value of applying your own weights is found in the [profile for Arizona](#), where I live. The Grand Canyon State ranks ninth overall from an average across multiple categories. If you have kids, it's worth knowing that Arizona actually gets top ranking because of the availability of choice, including school vouchers, charters, homeschooling, and tax credits. But, if you're in a regulated trade, you need to be aware that the state ranks at 17, in part because "occupational licensing has ratcheted up substantially over time." At 43 in terms of incarceration, Arizona is certainly no haven for anybody who emphasizes criminal justice reform.

Overall, New Hampshire, Florida, and Nevada hold the first three positions as the freest states on average. California, Hawaii, and New York trail the pack, at 48, 49, and 50. If that suggests a pattern to you governance-wise, Ruger and Sorens agree—at least, in matters of dollars and cents.

"[C]onservative states do better than left-liberal states on economic freedom, and rural/western/New England states do better than urban/southern/mid-Atlantic states on personal freedom," the authors note. "We see a strong negative relationship between leftward lean in the electorate and economic freedom," they add.

On the other hand, "[p]artisan politics is not always consistent with freedom (e.g., states with more marijuana freedom offer less tobacco freedom)," the authors point out. "Personal freedom is all over the map. It doesn't seem to have any relationship with more or less conservative or progressive states."

Personal freedom is harder than economic freedom to link to either of the major political groupings because Republicans and Democrats have staked out strong support for some freedoms while expressing hostility for others. If you want gun rights *and* marijuana legalization, you're better off looking at regional variance and the specific qualities of states than at which party dominates.

That said, overall, "statistically significant results suggest that when public opinion in a state moves left, freedom falls somewhat," the report notes.

But what about that nasty mark that two years of pandemic policy have left on our liberty? Can we expect that to fade? The report is optimistic that we'll recover much of what we lost.

"The lockdowns were mostly short-lived, and it seems unlikely that states will return to them," Ruger and Sorens conclude. "Thus, despite the initial overreaction of most states to the pandemic, the American states can generally be credited with reasonable, freedom-respectful responses to the pandemic in the long run, especially compared with international governments."

They also point out that several legislatures have hobbled governors' emergency powers, reducing the likelihood of future unilateral dictates. We've also gained a legacy of loosened rules "in the areas of education, health care licensing, and alcohol takeout and delivery" that is likely to linger in places.

Importantly, freedom seems to matter to Americans. Whether they consciously assess liberty as a factor or it simply affects the opportunity and quality of life they seek, people are moving to states that offer more leeway. Tracking migration patterns "shows a strong relationship between the starting level of freedom and subsequent net migration, suggesting that people are moving to freer states."

That holds up in a casual check. If you look at data from North American Moving Services, the states with the most outbound migrants are Illinois (#37 in *Freedom in the 50 States*), New York (#50), California (#48), New Jersey (#47), and Maryland (#45). The biggest gainers are Idaho (#10), Arizona (#9), South Carolina (#28), Tennessee (#4), and North Carolina (#16). Obviously, other factors such as climate, cost, and job openings play a role. But people do seem to be moving where freedom beckons.

"For many Americans, living under laws of which they approve is a constituent element of the good life," the authors write. "As a result, we should expect more ideological 'sorting.'"

Authors Jason Sorens practices what he preaches, by the way. Founder of the Free State Project, he lives among fellow migrants in New Hampshire, which ranks at first place in this report.