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A tale of two pairs of states

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From the beginning of time, people have moved from less desirable to more desirable places. In early times, the main driver of migration was the availability of food. In the modern world, the big drivers of migration are economic opportunity, including well-paying jobs and personal freedom, as well as climate.

This past week, the Cato Institute published its fifth edition of “Freedom in the 50 States,” authored by professors William Ruger and Jason Sorens. The authors include 230 policy variables in developing their index, ranging from tax burdens to the freedom to gamble. They published all of the variables and their relative weights so that individuals can adjust the weights to fit their own personal preferences and adjust the index to reflect their own values.

In the new edition, Florida is ranked as the most free overall, and New York the least free. This result is not surprising, and is implicitly understood by most Americans, and demonstrated by the fact that Florida has a positive net migration rate of 13.6 while New York has almost the mirror opposite with a negative net migration rate of minus 14.1. The neighboring states of Vermont and New Hampshire are also opposites in many respects, which again is illustrated by the fact that New Hampshire’s net migration rate is positive and Vermont’s is negative.

People voting with their feet is the strongest indication of whether they approve or disapprove of the policies of any state or country. There is no great line of people trying to move to Venezuela, North Korea, Cuba, New York or Vermont. The lines are longer in the other direction. Several of the key comparisons can be seen in the accompanying table.

Florida and New York present an almost perfect study of what to do and not do. In 1960, Florida had a population of only about a quarter of its current size, while New York had a population of about 84 percent of its current size. New York for many decades was the most populous state, and then lost its crown to California more than a half-century ago, then Texas overtook it, and finally last year Florida moved past New York.

Before WWII, Florida was a relatively poor state, and New York was the great rich state — “The Empire State.” A little more than a century ago, eastern New York, particularly the area around Rochester, was the “silicon valley” of the time — with great “high-tech” firms like Kodak and Bausch and Lomb. Now, much of the area is a wasteland. Cities like Rochester and Buffalo are mere shadows of their past, and population totals are far below their peak of decades ago. None of this had to happen.