



Point of View: Living freer than ever in Oklahoma

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Recent reports show an upswing in economic growth for Oklahoma. The state is moving in the right direction — but don't let it stop there.

Recently, we awarded Oklahoma with the title of most-improved state in our book "Freedom in the 50 States," a biennial ranking of economic and personal freedom across the country. Since 2000, Oklahoma has improved on each dimension of freedom we measure in that study — fiscal, regulatory and personal — and has moved from one of the bottom 10 states to one of the top 20 freest states in the country.

The state tax burden has fallen by about 25 percent since 2000, while local taxes have held steady as a share of income. The state also has done a good job of keeping its debt burden low. Oklahoma passed a right-to-work law in 2001, letting workers opt out of paying union dues. The state has made it easier to sell auto and homeowners' insurance, promoting consumer choice and competition. Tort reform has cut businesses' liability insurance costs. Legal casinos opened in 2005. Oklahoma now gives more families opportunities to seek out educational choices through a tax-credit scholarship law and a voucher program for special-needs students. In 2010, the state repealed driver's license suspensions for nondriving-related drug offenses. Oklahomans also got an assist from the U.S. Supreme Court in striking down the same-sex marriage ban.

What does all this new freedom mean in practice? Oklahoma's 3.6 percent annualized economic growth rate over the period of 2001 to 2015 surpassed that of all neighboring states except Texas.

Despite these improvements, Oklahoma still imprisons a much larger share of its population than most other states. This suggests there are too many laws with criminal penalties attached,

including for consensual or victimless activities, as well as excessive sentencing. Oklahomans took matters into their own hands and passed a ballot initiative that reduced felony drug possession to a misdemeanor.

Another significant problem for individual liberty is that civil asset forfeiture, which offends most Americans, is rampant in Oklahoma. If the police take your property, you have to go to court to prove you are innocent in order to get it back, and the police only have to show by a preponderance of the evidence that the property is subject to forfeiture. The same goes for eminent domain for private benefit: The state has done little to curb the ability of government to take private property and give it to developers. The Legislature has failed to limit the taking of property for reasons of “blight,” which can be defined so broadly as to apply to any neighborhood.

Oklahoma should build on its success and become a top 10 state for freedom. To do so, it will need to shore up private property rights and tackle the prison-industrial complex. It can also help people work their way up the ladder of success by reforming its onerous occupational licensing system and freeing nurses from current barriers to practice.

Oklahoma and Texas are neck-and-neck in terms of freedom. If the trends hold, Oklahoma will win this Red River Showdown and the economic and personal rewards that go with it.

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