

Arkansas ranks 23rd in freedom report

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December 14, 2021

(The Center Square) – Improved fiscal and regulatory policies helped Arkansas reach 23rd on the Cato Institute’s Freedom in the 50 States report, though the state has some work to do on personal freedoms, according to the report’s authors.

The Washington-based think tank ranked states based on an evaluation of their personal and economic freedoms. Arkansas received a poor score for personal freedom, and ranks among the 10 lowest states in the category.

“Arkansas has ranked consistently worse than most states on personal freedom, declining substantially relative to others since 2007,” Cato noted.

Economic freedoms have grown, however, pulling the state up to heights not reached in that category for the past two decades.

The report cited high marks in several areas. State debt is low, and while state taxes are far above the national average, local taxes are well below average. Arkansas has seen its tax burden continue to decline since 2014. Cato recommended cutting the state sales and use tax and let property taxes vary to meet local needs.

Arkansas does well on land use and enjoys high labor-market freedom, the report said. It ranked higher than most southern states on civil liability freedoms and saw an increase in health insurance freedom.

The tone is markedly different for issues on criminal justice, where Arkansas ranked low.

“Arkansas is one of the worst states in the country on criminal justice policies,” the authors wrote.

Arkansas has a worse incarceration rate than the national average but has improved gun rights, with constitutional carry passed in 2018.

The state has a strict hold on occupational licensing, requiring licenses for landscaping contractors, tree trimmers, security alarm installers, interpreters, and sanitarians. Cato suggested deregulating these occupations, among others.

Another area for improvement, according to Cato, is school choice, which the report blamed on the state’s fiscal centralization with a large amount of education funding coming from the state.

States that ranked the highest for freedom in Cato's report were New Hampshire, Florida, Nevada and Tennessee. New York, Hawaii, California and New Jersey were at the bottom of the list.