



## Live free or die? Utah ranks 20th on Cato Institute's 'freedom index' and lower than many states in the West

Utah's personal freedoms a 'mixed bag,' consistent with its religious and ideological background, report finds

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The term "freedom," be it personal, fiscal or regulatory, invariably winds its way into many political debates in Utah.

But how free are Utahns?

According to a new [Cato Institute](#) report, [Freedom in the 50 States](#), the Beehive State isn't as free as you might imagine.

Utah ranked 20th overall on the newly published index of 50 states, and lower than many states in the West, including Nevada, which ranked No. 3, Arizona at No. 9 and Idaho at 10. Neighboring Colorado was No 12.

By individual category, Utah scores 35th in fiscal policy, eighth in regulatory policy and 28th in personal freedom, according to the [report by the self-described Libertarian think tank](#).

"Utah is a top-10 state on regulatory freedom but has slipped in absolute and relative terms on fiscal policy, sinking back to where it was in 2014 after some years of improvement in terms of absolute scores. Personal freedoms are a mixed bag, consistent with the state's religious and ideological background," the report states.

The report, authored by William Ruger and Jason Sorens, examines state and local government intervention across more than 230 policy variables — from taxation to debt, eminent domain laws to occupational licensing, and drug policy to educational choice.

Utah ranks No. 8 on regulatory policy overall, slipping a bit from 2012 to 2016, "but it has improved slightly in absolute and relative terms since then."

With respect to land use freedom, Utah is better than average but appears to be tightening zoning rules over time. Labor law is solid but not at the very top, the report notes.

In terms of personal freedom, “Utah does surprisingly well given its reputation for paternalism.”

The report says personal freedom in the Beehive State has been improving over the years, even “creeping up toward the top half of the country.”

Utah “does well on gun rights, travel freedom, educational liberty and campaign finance freedom, but quite poorly on alcohol, gambling, and tobacco. The state was also very bad on marriage, but it was forced to legalize same-sex marriage in 2014, a move that also overturned its super-DOMA prohibiting gay partnership contracts.”

It continues: “Alcohol and gambling controls are draconian, where the state is 50th in both categories (and causing lots of Utah license plates to be seen at border town casinos).”

New Hampshire boasts of being the “Live Free or Die” state, and Freedom in the 50 States confirms its long-time state motto.

The state ranks first, followed by Florida, Nevada, Tennessee and South Dakota.

States that ranked lowest on the index of fiscal, regulatory and personal freedom spheres were Hawaii, California, New Jersey and Oregon, with New York deemed the least free state.

“Measuring freedom is important because freedom is valuable to people,” Ruger and Sorens wrote.

”Even minor infringements on freedom can erode the respect for fundamental principles that underlie our liberties. This index measures the extent to which states respect or disrespect these basic rights and liberties; in doing so, it captures a range of policies that threaten to chip away at the liberties we enjoy.”

According to the report, Utah’s overall tax burden is a bit above average.

“We show a dramatic drop in state revenues with the onset of the Great Recession, which haven’t quite been replaced. In fact, further tax cuts were enacted in FY 2014. But state tax burden climbed a lot in FY 2020 compared with the previous year and decade, moving higher to 6.2 percent, above the national average,” the report states.

Local taxes have remained generally steady at 3.7%, just below the national average rate of 3.9% of adjusted personal income, according to the report.

The report includes policy recommendations for each state.

For Utah, it recommends:

- Building up cash reserves and retiring state debt.

- Eliminating occupational licensing for taxi drivers and chauffeurs, funeral attendants, occupational therapist assistants, recreational therapists, interpreters and translators, and other occupations. Enacting mandatory sunrise review for new licensing proposals, ideally with consumer and professional economist representation.
- Introducing “backpack funding” to free children and their caregivers to pursue their education as they see fit.