

The 2018 edition of Freedom in the 50 States

How Free Is Your State?

How free is your state on tax policy? On land-use regulation? What about health insurance, marijuana, or educational freedom? The 2018 *Freedom in the 50 States* holds the answers as the only index to measure both economic and personal freedom at the state level.

Florida jumped eight spots from last year to take first place in overall freedom, with New Hampshire—last year’s top state—now in second place. The authors, William P. Ruger of the Charles Koch Institute and Jason Sorens of Dartmouth College, note that Florida and New Hampshire “significantly outpace” the rest of the top five states, which are clustered together. New York once again takes up the rear—it has been the least free state in the union every year since 2000. It also serves as proof that Americans care about freedom—or the lack thereof; about 1.3 million people (more than 9 percent of the state’s population) left New York for other states between 2000 and 2012.

OVERALL FREEDOM RANKING

TOP FIVE STATES

1. Florida
2. New Hampshire
3. Indiana
4. Colorado
5. Nevada



BOTTOM FIVE STATES

46. Vermont
47. New Jersey
48. California
49. Hawaii
50. New York

For the first time, this edition of the index offers annual data going back to the year 2000 and thus includes a wealth of data on how states have changed in the rankings over the years. Vermont, for example, was the “biggest loser” over the past 16-year period, thanks to fiscal centralization, rising taxes, and increasing regulation. Meanwhile, “Florida’s rise since 2009 has been nothing short of stunning,” the authors write. The state’s improvement is almost entirely because of its improving fiscal policies; its local and state taxes—along with government consumption and debt—have all fallen as a share of the private economy.

The overall freedom scores include both economic and personal freedoms. But across the states, personal and economic freedom are not correlated. Texas, for example, is in the top 10 states for economic freedom but is the least personally free state. “Texans may be unhappy with their last-place personal freedom showing, but it reflects poor criminal justice policies and the fact that the Lone Star State is increasingly behind the curve on marijuana, education, and gambling freedoms,” the authors explain. Florida is the number-one state for overall economic freedom, and Maine is the number-one state for overall personal freedom. ■

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Cato News Notes

CATO IS TOP-RANKED AMICUS BRIEF FILER

The blog *Empirical SCOTUS* recently attempted to quantify the quality of amicus briefs filed at the Supreme Court using BriefCatch, a popular legal analytical tool that measures briefs’ performances on five criteria: flow, plain English, punchiness, reading happiness, and sentence length. Using this system, they ranked the Cato Institute as the top overall amicus brief filer for the 2017–2018 Supreme Court term. “In an era where some scholars question whether oral arguments have very much utility, briefs—and especially amicus briefs—are thought to play a unique role in Supreme Court decisionmaking,” the blog noted. “High-quality writing remains one of the best ways for groups to get the Court’s attention, especially when the group does not have the institutional presence of the United States.”

BIER WINS JOURNALISM AWARD

In June, Cato’s David Bier won “Best Activism Journalism” at the Southern California Journalism Awards for his May 2017 *Reason* magazine piece, “Why the Wall Won’t Work: The Legal, Practical, Economic, and Moral Case against Trump’s Border Barrier.” The judges called his piece “a thorough, brick-by-brick explanation why the Trump wall won’t work.”

MUSTAFA AKYOL JOINS CATO

Turkish journalist and author Mustafa Akyol joined the Cato Institute as a senior fellow in June. A regular contributing opinion writer for



the *New York Times*, Akyol also writes regularly for Turkish publications such as the *Hürriyet Daily News* and for the Middle East-focused *Al-Monitor.com*. Akyol is the author of *Islam without Extremes: A Muslim Case for Liberty*, praised by the *Financial Times* as “a forthright and elegant Muslim defense of freedom.” His book has been published in multiple languages but was banned in Malaysia after Akyol was arrested by the country’s “religious police” for delivering a lecture on religious freedom.