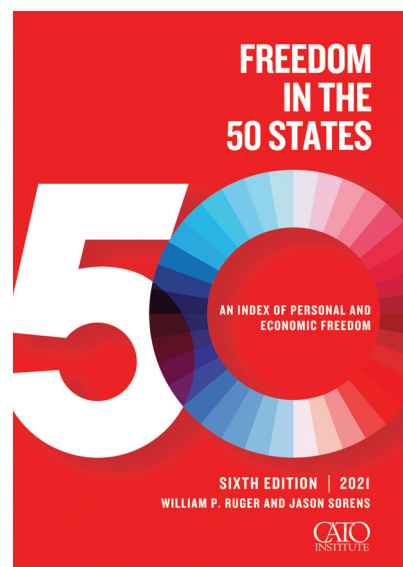


## A comprehensive data set of state policies, good and bad

# Finding Freedom across America

**W**hich state is the freest? It's a complicated question, considering the wide range of issues to be addressed. Ranking reports on the states tend to instead focus on a narrower and more specific set of issues. But one project from Cato tackles the big picture. Just released in its sixth edition, *Freedom in the 50 States*, authored by Will Ruger and Jason Sorens, takes a deep dive into hundreds of policy issues to provide a definitive ranking as well as a valuable data set for researchers and policymakers.

The latest edition adds new measures, including vaping regulations and COVID-19 responses, alongside taxes and spending, drug laws, school choice, land-use regulations, and



many others. Uniquely, the report seeks to combine measures of both social and economic freedom, scoring each state and then combining all the policy issues into a weighted index.

*Freedom in the 50 States* not only provides a current snapshot of the state of liberty but also a comprehensive set of data about how the states have measured up across the years, covering the time period from 2000 to 2019, and in some cases, further back than that. This allows researchers to examine not just current correlations but how changes in the degree of freedom have affected the performance of states across the decades.

In this year's report, New Hampshire is back on top, taking first place after having slipped to number two behind Florida in the previous edition. Florida

remains near the top, too, in second place, followed by Nevada, Tennessee, and South Dakota.

At the other end of the spectrum, highly taxed and highly regulated New York comes in dead last once again. While the Empire State's fiscal and economic policies weigh heavily, the state also measures poorly compared with other states on personal freedom. The other states in the bottom five include Hawaii, California, New Jersey, and Oregon.

The authors make it clear that their analysis is based in a libertarian conception of freedom. "We ground our conception of freedom on an individual rights framework. In our view, individuals should be allowed to dispose of their lives, liberties, and property as they see fit, so long as they do not infringe on the rights of others," they write. At the same time, the index's transparent data deliberately allow for people to make their own choices about the relative weighting of different issues, or which ones to exclude altogether.

One noticeable trend is that Republican-governed states have performed better than Democratic-governed states, although there are some exceptions, such as Nevada. At the top of the list, New Hampshire is also a closely divided purple state, with legislative majorities frequently changing hands.

As Cato's executive vice president David Boaz has noted in response to past editions, this does not entirely reflect a simple partisan preference for more freedom. Rather, "the federal courts prevent conservative states from taking away a lot of the freedoms they'd like to, while they're much more tolerant of intrusions on freedom found in liberal states." Because the courts have set a floor for personal liberties such as LGBT rights and criminal justice while leaving much more room on economic policy, the states reflect a wider range of policy choices on the latter. ■

## Cato News Notes

### RICHARD STROUP, RIP

**R**ichard Stroup, a pioneer of free-market environmentalism and Cato adjunct scholar, passed away in November at age 78. He taught for 37 years at Montana State University, cofounded



the Property and Environment Research Center, and was one of the leaders in the

development of New Resource Economics, which is now widely credited for its insights into the importance of clearly defined property rights for environmental outcomes.

### CUBA'S FREEDOM SONG

**T**he Cuban protest song "Patria y Vida" was named best song of the year and best urban song at the 2021 Latin Grammys. One of the coauthors



and performers of the song, the rapper known as El Funky, visited

Cato after having managed to leave Cuba days earlier. The artist spoke about those imprisoned by the communist regime, including Maykel Castillo, one of the other author-performers of the song. The interview can be found at [cato.org](https://www.cato.org).