

PREFACE

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the *Index of Economic Freedom*. Such an occasion gives us pause and allows us to step back and contemplate the improvement various nations have made toward freedom over the past three decades. In the decades since 1995 when The Heritage Foundation published the first edition of the *Index*, the world has undergone countless tests to the benefits of economic freedom.

This past year—2023—was yet another rife with tragic events. From Russia’s ongoing war with Ukraine and the Chinese Communist Party’s saber rattling to Hamas’s horrific terrorist attack on Israel and Houthi terrorists attacking ships in the Red Sea, the past year has served as a powerful reminder that economic freedom isn’t inevitable. Indeed, it is always under attack.

And not just from America’s foreign enemies. Despite conservative wins beating back bad liberal policies on the state level, the progressive agenda in Washington continues to severely undercut the economic freedom of Americans. The Biden Administration bends over backwards for well-connected special interests, but it won’t lift a finger or even listen to the millions of hard-working American men and women across this country.

We know from history that human flourishing comes in part from economic fairness, opportunity, and liberty. We also know, however, that the enemies of freedom are persistently pursuing collectivism, equity, and social justice. Conservatives know that these false idols produce disastrous results—such as economic stagnation, poverty, deprivation, and oppression—but too often we forget the source of their appeal.

The truth is that “a moral and religious people,” to quote John Adams, would never be tempted by socialism. Because they are virtuous and capable of governing themselves, the freedom to “reap what you sow” would come naturally to them. That’s why

progressives in Washington are so laser focused on destroying families, sowing chaos and disorder in our local communities, and undermining fair elections. They know that if Americans are permitted to govern themselves, personally and politically, all interest in their redistributionist schemes will fall apart.

To defeat our progressive elites, we must defend the efficiency of free markets but, more importantly, the morality of free markets: the dignity they give every human person to create, serve, and reap the fruits of his labor. Just as importantly, we must defend and fortify the institutions that undergird free markets: the American dinner table, the American town square, and the American local militia.

This is the challenge we now face. We are at a crossroads and must choose between self-governance, human dignity, and ordered liberty or a society run by the managerial elite with no room for dissent or responsibility. One path leads to prosperity; the other leads to ruin. As President Ronald Reagan once reminded us:

You and I are told we must choose between a left or right, but I suggest there is no such thing as a left or right. There is only an up or down. Up to man’s age-old dream—the maximum of individual freedom consistent with order—or down to the ant heap of totalitarianism.

Now is the time for choosing and correcting the course. The Heritage Foundation’s *Index of Economic Freedom* provides practical examples of successful policies proven in action. It is up to us to provide the political will to implement them.

Kevin D. Roberts, PhD
President
The Heritage Foundation
February 2024