



News Release

For Immediate Release: 7.14.25

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Arkansas Moves Into Lead Above all States for Religious Liberty Protections, Governor Sanders Announces

Legislative Action Again Drives Gains in 2026 State Rankings, Arkansas and Tennessee Earn First “Excellent” Ratings

Little Rock, AR—Today, First Liberty Institute’s Center for Religion, Culture & Democracy (“CRCD”) revealed the results of its fifth annual Religious Liberty in the States (“RLS”) index, the only comprehensive comparison of how all 50 states protect religious liberty through law. The 2026 RLS was announced by Arkansas Governor Sanders at the Arkansas State Capitol, where she was joined by Kelly Shackelford, President, CEO, and Chief Counsel at First Liberty, Dr. Mark David Hall, director of the Religious Liberty in the States project, and Dr. Paul D. Mueller, associate director of the project.

For the first time, Arkansas tops the national ranking, earning a score of 89.2%, followed by Tennessee (85.0%), Florida (76.9%), Montana (71.3%), and Illinois (70.4%). Arkansas and Tennessee are the first states to earn an “excellent” rating in the RLS index, reflecting the fact that both states have adopted at least 80 percent of the possible religious liberty protections considered in the report.

“Religious liberty is America’s First Freedom, and Arkansas is leading the nation in protecting it,” **said Governor Sanders**. “Our rights come from God, not government, and every American should be free to live according to their faith and conscience. We’ll continue defending that freedom and ensuring the Natural State remains the best place in the country to live, work, and worship.”

“Religious liberty is best protected when leaders are willing to act before the rights of people of faith are threatened,” **said Shackelford**. “Governor Sanders and Arkansas lawmakers have taken that responsibility seriously, adopting strong protections that help ensure Arkansans can live and work according to conscience. Arkansas’s top ranking is a well-earned recognition, and it should motivate leaders across the country to strengthen religious liberty protections in their own states.”

The 2026 index evaluates 50 distinct legal protections, grouped into 20 safeguards, that states can adopt to support religious freedom in daily life from education and health care to family law, economic life, and religious practice. As with previous editions, the index tracks changes over time and ranks each state based on the percentage of possible

safeguards it has adopted. Visit the index website (www.religiouslibertyinthestates.com) to see each state's score, rank, and change over time. The website also has resources for individuals, researchers, and policy makers who are interested in how their state can improve.

“States have always served as laboratories of liberty, and this year's results show why that matters,” **said Dr. Mark David Hall**, director of the Religious Liberty in the States project. “Arkansas's rise to the top of the index demonstrates that state lawmakers can take concrete action to protect what America's founders called ‘the sacred right of conscience.’ These safeguards help ensure that Americans are free to live out their faith in public life, not only within the walls of a house of worship.”

“This year's changes show that the Religious Liberty in the States index is dynamic by design,” **said Dr. Paul D. Mueller**, associate director of the project. “Arkansas moved from sixth to first, and Tennessee moved from tenth to second, because both states adopted meaningful protections for religious liberty. With this index, citizens and legislators can see where their state is doing well, where it still has room to improve, and which existing laws could help them better protect the right of conscience.”

Arkansas rose from sixth in the nation in 2025 to first in 2026 after adopting HB 1615, an important piece of legislation protecting a wide range of individuals and institutions from being forced to participate in wedding ceremonies to which they have religious objections. Tennessee also made significant gains after adopting a strong medical conscience law, moving from tenth to second place in the rankings.

The 2026 RLS index has expanded to 50 legal items across 20 safeguards, adding three new protections. These include medical conscience protections that permit individuals to decline to participate in genetic counseling, protections for individuals who object to joining labor unions for religious reasons, and laws protecting people from discrimination at public institutions of higher education because of their religious commitments.

RLS is committed to the highest standards of scholarly research. From its beginning, it has been committed to transparency and the best practices for social-scientific research. This has involved forming a well-qualified advisory council, rigorous peer review, and adoption of robust research policies.

To view the complete rankings, download your state's scorecard, or explore the methodology, visit: www.religiouslibertyinthestates.com

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About the Center for Religion, Culture & Democracy

The Center for Religion, Culture & Democracy (CRCD) at First Liberty Institute supports the creation and promotion of high-quality scholarship at the intersection of religion, culture, and democracy. Our publications, programming, and resources affirm the importance of religion as a public good for strengthening social bonds and reinforcing foundational freedoms.

About First Liberty Institute

[First Liberty Institute](#) is the largest legal organization in the nation dedicated exclusively to defending religious freedom for all Americans.

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