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Opinion

Allen Mendenhall: Red states, blue governments

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 09.06.25



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Political prognostication occasionally rewards the patient analyst with confirmation of suspicions long harbored.

Such satisfaction attended my reading of the State Leadership Initiative's recently published "[State Leadership 2025 Index](#)," which eschews the conventional fixation on gubernatorial ratings or legislative box-score keeping in favor of a comprehensive evaluation of state governance.

The report's public debut has generated the predictable media frisson. Whether this attention signals a genuine analytical breakthrough or merely the latest iteration of our era's inexhaustible appetite for scorecards remains to be seen.

The data confirm, at any rate, what astute observers of American federalism have long declared: Republicans' commanding control of state legislative seats nationwide represents a triumph more apparent than real.

[Twenty-three Republican trifectas](#) across the republic, versus the Democrats' 15, suggest dominance. Yet this electoral ascendancy has not generated conservative results. Many Red States are governed much like their blue state counterparts, if not worse.

As my friend Noah Wall, president of the State Leadership Institute, provocatively states in the report, "Red states are just blue states with lower taxes."

This phenomenon—electoral success divorced from policy achievement—reflects twin pathologies plaguing the most proximate tier of American democracy: legislators act with little scrutiny, while citizens remain fixated on Washington, D.C., and voters in supposedly conservative states overlook the irony that their own capitols often stand as bastions of progressivism.

Here are the troubling findings:

1. “Federal dependency is rampant.” In fact, “7 of the 10 most federally dependent states are red” (Alabama is the 16th most federally dependent).
2. “Regulation is just as bad in red states as in blue states (and in many cases worse).”
3. “Bureaucracy per capita is virtually indistinguishable from in red vs blue states.”
4. “Education bureaucracies are bloated.”
5. “University payrolls are worse in red states.”
6. “Crime is higher in red states.”
7. “Family stability is crumbling,” and “most red states have fewer than 50% of teens raised in intact families.”

The report celebrates the growing ESG resistance, but unfortunately, Alabama is way behind on this issue. We also derive over 30% of our state revenue from federal funding and lack a robust private sector, with roughly 2,000 state employees per 100,000 residents.

The authors’ methodological approach and supporting data merit examination by those inclined toward statistical granularity, but the salient conclusion requires no such excavation: Alabama’s legislative performance in advancing conservative governance proves as anemic as that of its putatively red-state brethren.

The Yellowhammer State’s failure to translate electoral supremacy into policy coherence merely exemplifies a nationwide malady: the hollowing out of conservative governance where conservative rhetoric abounds.

One hopes that Tommy Tuberville’s senatorial record of confounding institutional expectations will continue in Montgomery. His demonstrated capacity for independent judgment and resistance to the blandishments of entrenched interests suggests the possibility—however remote in our age of

performative politics—of governance unencumbered by the usual constellation of donors, lobbyists and influence peddlers.

The American experiment in federalism was predicated on the notion that states would serve as laboratories of democracy, allowing for experimentation and innovation. Instead, too many have become museums of dysfunction, preserving in amber the very problems they were designed to remedy.

Perhaps it takes a former coach to remember that victories are measured not by the cheering of crowds, but by points on the board.

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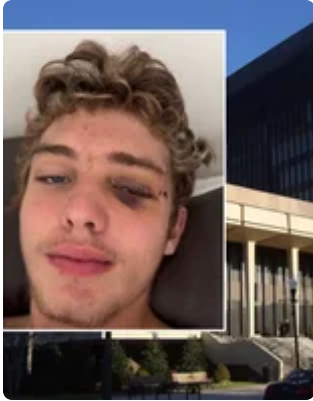
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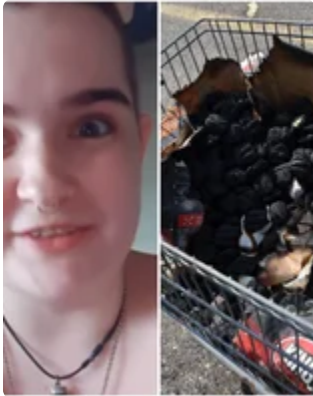
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