

California Ranks Dead Last Among US States in Tipping. Why?

“I’m going to have to ask you to put your cigarette out.”

I was a college student working as a waiter at a Wisconsin restaurant more than twenty years ago when I sheepishly said these words. I didn’t like saying them, and was frustrated I had to. The guest, who was sitting with his date on the indoor balcony—the fanciest part of a very nice restaurant—had asked if he could smoke. I had told him no, smoking was not allowed. He decided he’d light up anyway.

My request to put out the cigarette didn’t seem to bother the man, about 40. He shrugged and grinded it out.

Minutes later I was taking a drink order in the bar when the restaurant owner walked up to me.

“Milty, I thought you told that couple on the balcony not to smoke,” he growled.

“I did! Twice!”

“Well they’re smoking again.”

Without another word, he stalked into the dining room, went up the stairs and barked at the couple. Cigarettes were hastily doused. Apologies were made.

There were no more attempts to smoke that night, but the guest clearly blamed me for his scolding. He was unpleasant and demanding, and at the end of the night he left me a buck as a tip on a nearly \$200 check.

America's Stingiest Tippers

I share my experience to illustrate a point. Servers have to put up with a lot of stuff (to put it politely). It's just part of the job. Sure, you get plenty of nice people as guests. But you'll get rude and unreasonable ones too, and you have to manage them as best you can.

As a server, sometimes things are just out of your hands. Maybe the cook burned a steak, or maybe the bartender botched a drink order. Things will go wrong, and it's your job to deal with it.

Serving tables was probably the second hardest job I've ever had. It's stressful, chaotic, and more demanding physically than most people would believe.

Knowing this, I've tried to take good care of servers ever since, to tip generously even when my experience isn't the best. This is why a new report on tipping caught my attention.

The survey, [Toast's Q4 2022 Restaurant Trends Report](#), breaks down tipping by state and major cities. The five most generous tipping cities of the twelve major metros analyzed were Cleveland (20.6%), Denver (19.8%), Salt Lake City (19.6%), Phoenix (19.5%), and Richmond (19.3%).

The lowest two cities? San Francisco (17%) and Los Angeles (17.5%).

It turns out that Californians generally are the worst tippers in the nation. A breakdown by states shows the Golden State ranks dead last in tipping (17.5%), far below the national leaders: Delaware (21.8%), Indiana (20.8%), Wyoming (20.8%), Kentucky (20.7%), and West Virginia (20.6%).

Why so Tight?

This invites a question: why do Californians tip so poorly?

It's not because they are poorer. Data show the Golden State ranks in the top five in the country in [median household income](#) (\$111,622). And while it could be that California suffers from an army of bad waiters and bartenders who deserve less tips, I'll posit a different theory.

[Year](#) after [year](#), reports show that the United States ranks at the very top in charitable giving. The years I cite are not outliers. The Charities Aid Foundation annually publishes reports showing the United States with the highest charitable giving score in the world (although the US [recently fell to third](#), following the pandemic, which altered charitable giving).

"...people in the United States are so generous that their voluntary giving amounts to 10.2 percent of gross domestic product," economist Daniel Mitchell [noted a few years ago](#). "The only other nations that even crack 5 percent of GDP are the Netherlands, Canada, and the United Kingdom."

Mitchell also noticed something else. People in the supposedly "compassionate welfare states" in Europe had the most dismal results in charitable giving.

"Voluntary social expenditure in major European nations such as France, Germany, Italy, and Spain averages less than 2 percent of GDP," he observed.

[More recent data](#) show little has changed. Spain, France, and Italy all rank near the very bottom in charitable giving. (Germany is average, but still well below the US.)

'Government Spending Is Not Charity'

Now, tipping is not the exact same thing as charity, but it's similar in a key way: it's *voluntary*. This gets to an important distinction between the political left and the political right.

In his popular 2006 book [*Who Really Cares: The Surprising Truth About Compassionate Conservatism*](#), Harvard professor Arthur Brooks outlined the different ways conservatives and progressives viewed compassion and generosity. Specifically, Brooks noted that many progressives saw their support for social justice and welfare programs as a form of generosity.

"One of the greatest political hypocrisies of our time is the pious sloganeering about liberals in America being more compassionate than conservatives," wrote Brooks. "Government spending is not charity."

Brooks is right. State spending is not charity. It's not generosity. Generosity [requires choice](#), and it also requires something else: giving something that is actually yours.

"It is easy to be conspicuously 'compassionate' if others are being forced to pay the cost," Murray Rothbard once famously quipped.

Many on the political left today fail to realize this simple truth, including people in deeply blue California (and welfare state supporters in Italy, France, and Spain).

Humans deeply desire to be compassionate, and it stands to reason that some are earning their "compassion high"—[giving releases endorphins](#)—not through charity but by voicing support for political policies that make them feel virtuous, including the minimum wage, rent control, and high taxes.

This is not mere conjecture. Brooks cites data in his book showing conservative households give 30 percent more than progressive households to charity. (The gap is even larger for religious conservatives.) A study funded by Google found an even greater funding gap, *New York Times* writer Nicholas D. Kristof [has noted](#). More recently, a 2021 [meta analysis](#) published by the National Library of Medicine found that “political conservatives are significantly more charitable than liberals at an overall level.”

Again, are there some differences between tipping and charitable giving? Sure.

But can Brooks’ book and similar research help us understand why Californians are such lousy tippers? Perhaps. As someone who still sorely remembers getting stiffed with a \$1 tip on a \$200 check for telling someone to put out his cigarette, I think it at least demands some attention.

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