

Colorado ranks no. 2 in index of free states

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DENVER • Do you read stories about our state government and wonder, "Why don't they just stop messing around and leave me alone?"

According to a study, Colorado does a better job of leaving you alone than almost every other state.

Only New Hampshire, and only by a whisker, scores higher in "Freedom in the 50 States," a study released by the Mercatus Center at George Mason University that claims to be the first comprehensive ranking of "economic and personal freedom in the American states."

New Hampshire and Colorado were the top two in the study, finishing in almost a dead heat. Last, and well behind the rest, was New York.

William P. Ruger and Jason Sorens, co-authors of the George Mason report, adhere strictly to the idea that adults "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."

"The fewer regulations the better, in our view," Sorens said.

Lower taxes, too, are better in their eyes.

The authors take a dim view of seat belt laws, campaign finance limits, smoking bans, gun-control laws, restrictions on gambling and alcohol, and especially any attempt to regulate education.

Colorado scored third highest in the economic-freedom ranking and 15th on personal freedom.

Not all freedoms will be highly regarded by all people. Legalized marijuana, prostitution and same-sex civil unions are, for this study, good for freedom. Some issues were excluded. Abortion policy was left out of the rankings because the authors could not decide whether a fetus has rights that would be trampled by a woman's exercise of her personal freedom.

Sorens, a political science professor at the University of Buffalo, acknowledged subjectivity in the weighting of the various measurements, but said the report tried to compare various factors according to impact - "the number of people affected and basically how deeply they're affected."

Thus tax rates were weighted more heavily than mandatory recycling rules.

This is not the only study to give Colorado high marks on some kind of freedom index. In the 2008 edition of "Economic Freedom of North America," published annually by the Fraser Institute in Vancouver, British Columbia, Colorado tied for third among the 50 states.

But Sorens said his study was more inclusive.

"All the previous studies have focused only on economic freedom, so looking at taxes, spending and economic regulations," Sorens said. "We broaden that substantially and look at all kinds of personal and social freedoms."

Sorens said he and Ruger ranked the states on about 140 indicators, from income taxation to fireworks laws, from home-schooling rules to drug policy.

Economic freedom was weighted to account for about three-quarters of Colorado's total score.

Jason Clemens, director of research at the San Francisco-based Pacific Research Institute, which also plays the freedom-measuring game, cautioned that it was difficult to measure personal freedoms. "The more research the better," he said, but added that scholars have spent years debating how to weight economic variables, which are relatively easy to express in statistics. "You take that problem and it just becomes amplified when you say, 'OK, how do we measure free speech?'" Clemens said.

Sorens said the freedom index has practical implications: People are voting with their feet, contributing to the prosperity of Colorado and other relatively free states.

But the limits of such research began to emerge when he said his analysis shows that some people are moving to Kansas and some are leaving Hawaii because Kansas is No. 12 on the freedom index and Hawaii's at 45.

Since the 2000 census, Kansas has had a net loss of population because of migration, while Hawaii has had a net gain. But it might be a stretch to infer that climate, or perhaps pineapples, are more important to more people than freedom.

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