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Wyoming loves freedom? A Libertarian think tank doesn't think so.

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People value freedom differently. To some, it means no laws at all – to others, it means the existence of regulations that allow them to live their lives unencumbered.

Freedom can mean little-to-no taxes, or the right to enjoy vices like gambling or psychedelic drugs without punishment. It can be literal – a low incarceration rate, for example – or abstract, like freedom of, or from, religion.

It turns out, Wyoming can improve on some of those fronts. A new study from the Cato Institute, a Washington, D.C.–based free market think tank, has determined that Wyoming is among the least free places in the country, ranking 38th out of 50 states: down from a peak position of No. 21 in 2005.

“As a highly resource-dependent state, Wyoming’s fiscal situation fluctuates greatly from year to year, causing unusual volatility in its freedom scores,” the report reads. “Improving regulatory policy can be a way to diversify the economy, and the Equality State could also stand to improve on personal freedom, where it is well below average.”

Interestingly, Wyoming ranks well-below several of its neighbors, including Colorado (ranked fourth) and North and South Dakota (ranked sixth and eighth, respectively.)

The annual report, which rates states based on more than 160 separate policy areas, focuses on economic and social freedoms within each of the states dating back to 2016. The report weighed a state’s score in nearly equal parts on fiscal policy, regulatory policy and personal freedom.

Making up each of these scores is a broad swath of policies, some of which are weighted with more significance toward a state’s freedom score than others: under social policies for example, criminal justice policy and incarceration rates (8.5 percent) and gun rights (4.5 percent) are given more weight toward a state’s freedom score than education (2.6 percent) and mala prohibita civil liberties (1.2 percent), which incorporates the legality of sex work and physician-assisted suicide.

The survey also places a heavy emphasis on areas like taxation (accounting for 23.4 percent across all categories) and regulations that exist for the benefit of public health (seat belt laws and trans fat bans come to mind) and worker protections (right-to-work laws and state minimum wage).

The Koch Brothers-funded organization recommended several policy reforms to ensure Wyoming – in the eyes of the Cato Institute – becomes a stanchion of freedom in the West, including:

- Privatizing hospitals to reduce government employment;
- Allow sales taxes to be cut;
- Allow employers to buy privatized workers' compensation coverage from any willing seller, rather than relying on the state fund;
- Privatize the state fund;
- Limiting equitable sharing of revenues made through civil forfeiture between the government and law enforcement in an effort to end "policing for profit" policies.

Where freedom lies

Wyoming, with no personal income tax and very few gun laws, should at face value be among the nation's most free states. In some aspects, it is. Wyoming ranked first in the nation for the right to choose one's own health insurance and in the top 10 for gun rights, tobacco use and occupational freedom. In other areas, like campaign finance regulation, Wyoming is also considered among the nation's least-regulated states.

However, regulation in other areas – particularly in education (ranked 44th on the freedom index) – and the degree in which Wyoming incarcerates people (45th) has assisted in tanking the state's freedom score.

The report also noted the state's land-use freedom, lack of minimum wage and a right-to-work law as shining examples of the economic liberties employers may find when they come to Wyoming. However, Wyoming also has some policies that, in the eyes of the Cato Institute, make it less free, including anti-discrimination laws that go beyond the federal minimum and poor laws around cannabis use.

What separates Wyoming from say, Colorado – among the nation's most free states – are things like occupational permitting, which Colorado is not too picky with, Colorado's cannabis use laws and other areas, like the state's liberal gun policy. North Dakota, while considered significantly more free than Wyoming, nevertheless incarcerates people who commit victimless crimes at higher rates and offers some of the least amounts of freedom for school choice, leading to its dead-last ranking in education.