

THE DURANGO HERALD

Since 1881

Cato Institute: Colorado 11th ‘freest’ states

Libertarian think tank releases rankings

Peter Marcus

August 21, 2016

Colorado remains one of the nation’s “freest states,” according to the libertarian Cato Institute.

The Washington, D.C.-based think tank released its “Freedom in the 50 States” rankings on Monday, placing Colorado 11th in the nation.

New Hampshire, Alaska, Oklahoma, Indiana and South Dakota make up a quintet at the top of the ranking. New York is by far the “least free” state, followed by California, Hawaii, New Jersey and Maryland, according to the Cato Institute.

By individual category, Colorado scored 22nd in fiscal policy, 25th in regulatory policy and second in personal freedom, with much attention placed on the legalization of marijuana and gun rights.

But researchers said Colorado should consider trimming spending on parks. The state spends almost twice the national average on local parks, according to researchers.

Some might bristle at that, though, as public parks are considered by many Coloradans to be critical to quality of life, and public polling shows that many taxpayers would spend more on parks, according to environmental groups. Coloradans usually support parks measures at the polls.

“People are drawn to Colorado partly because of our excellent parks and public lands, and the quality of life and scenery they afford,” said Scott Braden, wilderness and public lands advocate for Conservation Colorado.

“For CATO to criticize park spending by simply comparing to the average spending of other states seems like unserious analysis and click bait, and fails to recognize how park and open space funding benefits both people and the economy.”

The Cato Institute also recommended cutting spending on unemployment and business subsidies, while also reducing taxes.

If some November ballot proposals are approved by voters, Colorado could slip in future rankings, as the measures might be perceived as intruding on personal freedom.

Colorado voters will be asked to consider a \$25 billion ballot initiative to create a single-payer health care system.

Voters will also be asked to raise the state minimum wage. Another proposed ballot initiative for the fall would ask voters to raise taxes on cigarettes.

The state moved up two spots from its 2012 ranking of 13th. In 2010, the state ranked 18th; in 2008 it ranked 12th; and in 2006 it ranked ninth.

The study examined state and local government intervention, including taxation, debt, eminent domain laws, occupational licensing and drug policy, to name a few of the more than 230 variables that were studied.

“While the federal government has become more intrusive and inefficient over the last two decades, individual states are providing Americans with a little-recognized renaissance of policy innovation that is making their citizens freer,” the report’s authors said in a statement. “If we want to save our freedom and restore good government, it is to the states that we must look and not to the federal government.”

The study was authored by William Ruger and Jason Sorens, researchers with Cato.

Colorado’s overall tax burden is a little lower than the national average, but state-level taxes have crept upward since fiscal year 2009. Local tax revenues peaked in fiscal year 2009 and fell back slightly to fiscal year 2012.

Thanks to a 1992 law, the Taxpayer’s Bill of Rights, or TABOR, taxes cannot be raised in Colorado without a vote of the people. The law also curbs government spending and requires taxpayer refunds when there is a revenue surplus.