

The Gazette

Iowans not as free as we once were, survey says

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Iowa is slipping down the rankings of the freest states.

That's according to the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank which has published a **Freedom in the 50 States** index since 2000. Iowa slides to a disappointing **No. 27** in the latest list, an especially sad showing for a state which has consistently ranked around No. 10 for most of the study's history.

Iowa has fallen 18 spots from a high of No. 9 in 2011, during which time Republicans — supposedly the party of limited government — have controlled the governorship and at least one chamber of the Iowa Legislature. Analysts attribute the stumble to Iowa's creeping business regulations, and to other states catching up or overtaking Iowa on social issues.

“Iowa's competitive policy advantages have faded. It is now a middling state overall because of an absolute decline in fiscal freedom and a relative slide down from its high ranking on personal freedom,” authors at the Cato Institute wrote.

Iowa ranks among the worst 10 states — six times — nearly as often as among the best 10 states — eight times.

Our state's top rating (besides “cable and telecom freedom,” where more than 20 states tie for first place) comes in the “labor-market freedom” category, which relies heavily on right-to-work laws, which Iowa has. Iowa also earned high marks for gambling freedom and low government debt.

And our state's worst ranking comes in the broad “mala prohibita” category, which measures a slew of miscellaneous nanny state regulations, like raw milk bans and prostitution laws. Iowa also received failing assessments for marijuana freedom and state tax burden.

Rankings of this sort are subjective, but the Cato Institute scholars offer loads of information to explain their findings, organized into **a 151-page report**. Authors weighted more than 230 policy variables, divided into three categories — fiscal, regulatory and personal freedom. The Freedom in the 50 States project allows users to set their own policy priorities and weight each as users see fit. The full report also provides alternative ratings from different perspectives on abortion and right-to-work laws, recognizing ideological libertarians may have legitimate differences about which sides of those debates promote the greatest level of freedom.

With the study's focus on fiscal and regulatory freedom, the bluest states predictably fall low on the list, with New York at No. 50 and California at No. 48 this year. However, a few of the high-achieving states were politically purple, like New Hampshire, Colorado and Nevada each in the top five. Reliably red states tended to fall somewhere in the middle. The authors call Iowa a "center-left state," which doesn't quite square Republicans' overwhelming electoral success here in the past few years.

So how can Iowans restore our struggling reputation among the pro-freedom scorekeepers?

For starters, lower taxes. Even with the large corporate and individual income tax cuts passed by the Legislature this year, Iowa's tax rates remain some of the highest in the nation. One factor the Freedom in the 50 States analysis may not pick up on is the state's extraordinarily generous system of tax credits and deductions. By eliminating some of those tax cutouts, Iowa could reduce its overall tax rates and achieve higher ratings from outside analysts on tax policy.

Then Iowa must join the rest of the nation in modernizing laws on marijuana. Most Americans now live in states where possessing small amounts of marijuana carries no criminal penalties, and a significant number enjoy outright legalization of recreational marijuana. In sharp contrast, Iowa doesn't even allow terminally ill patients to possess or use plant marijuana, with one of the most heavily restricted medical marijuana programs in the nation. It's a national embarrassment.

And this should be an easy one — Iowa should get rid of the puritan laws governing alcohol. The state freedom report knocked Iowa for our high taxes on distilled spirits and the fact the state's heavy-handed involvement in alcohol wholesaling.

Iowa has a rich tradition of valuing freedom, as one of only four states with mottos referring to "liberty." Surely we can do better than No. 27.