

A good state for freedom

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When we're comparing the amount of freedom available around the world, there are stark differences, such as between a constitutional republic like the United States and a brutal dictatorship like North Korea. And there are relatively subtler ones, like the difference between, say, Indiana and New Jersey.

Because freedom is the most valuable political commodity there is, we should note even the small differences. It is worth celebrating that, according to a study by the Cato Institute, Indiana is the No. 4 "most free" state in the union. Significantly, "Indiana has more personal freedom than most other conservative states," the study says.

The study covers both personal and economic freedoms and is based on a number of factors, including: state taxation, local taxation, land use freedom, health insurance freedom, labor-market freedom, occupational freedom, incarceration and arrests, marriage freedom, education, gun control, alcohol and marijuana freedom.

It's interesting to note that various of the freedoms listed appeal to different positions on the political spectrum. Gun freedom and educational freedom are big concerns of conservatives. Marriage freedom and marijuana freedom are big for liberals. Things like land use and occupational freedom are issues for everybody.

Freedom requires a respect for individual rights. Individuals, Cato notes, "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." This understanding of freedom follows from the natural-rights liberal thought of John Locke, Immanuel Kant and Robert Nozick.

If we respect the freedom to choose, we have to accept that not all people are going to choose what we would, and we deserve that same respect. Tolerance is an important component of freedom.

The federal government has become such a behemoth that too much of our lives is dictated from one place. But the remnants of federalism let us design some of our lives at the local level. Those who don't mind control can go to No. 49 California or New York, the least free state of all. Those who aren't afraid to take responsibility can go to No. 2 Alaska, or the freest state of all, New Hampshire.

"Live free or die," indeed. Gives Indiana something to shoot for.