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Report shows need to defend citizens' freedom

November 4, 2016

We think of the United States as the land of the free, home of the brave. But the freedoms enjoyed by citizens in this country may not be as robust as one would hope, based on the latest edition of the Human Freedom Index.

This report employs a broad measure that encompasses personal, civil and economic freedom across the world. Published by the Cato Institute, the Fraser Institute and the Liberales Institute at the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom, it provides a country-to-country way to compare citizen freedom.

The report uses 76 distinct indicators related to the following areas: rule of law; security and safety; movement; religion; association, assembly, and civil society; expression; relationships; size of government; legal system and property rights; access to sound money; freedom to trade internationally; and regulation of credit, labor and business.

The report examined 152 countries for 2012, the most recent year for which sufficient data is available. The authors concluded the 10 jurisdictions with the most freedom were Hong Kong, Switzerland, Finland, Denmark, New Zealand, Canada, Australia, Ireland, the United Kingdom and Sweden.

You'll notice one country is notably absent from the top 10. The United States is ranked 20th, trailing countries like Germany (12th) and Chile (18th).

Admittedly, the United States remains far better than most locales, and the countries you would expect to rank poorly do. (Russia ranks 111th. China is 132nd. Iran is 152nd.) Still, the U.S. ranking is surprisingly low and has declined since 2008, when it ranked 17th best overall.

Even more worrisome is the report's personal freedom sub-index, in which the authors use 34 variables that focus on "legal protection and security" and specific personal freedoms: movement; religion; association, assembly and civil society; expression; and relationships.

In 2012, the U.S. ranked 31st in personal freedom. Given that the report authors' libertarian leanings cause them to give higher marks to nations that allow same-sex marriages (which the U.S. does now), that means the United States is getting a much-lower-than-expected ranking in personal freedom despite changing marriage regulations in ways that the report's authors favor.

With so many variables measured, it's not easy to identify precise policies that are holding this country back in the report's rankings (which is one flaw of the report). But given the broad criteria and the libertarian leanings of the report's authors, it's safe to assume many policies enacted between 2008 and 2012 played a role. And the policies pursued since that time will have done little to help.

Government's size has expanded greatly under the Obama administration, and burdensome regulations are growing exponentially. Obamacare dramatically restricted consumer choice, raised prices and reduced consumer access to doctors. Attempts have been made to curtail religious freedom by forcing people to support activities they find immoral, such as abortion.

And worse may be yet to come. Hillary Clinton openly campaigns on restricting free speech, albeit under the fig leaf of "campaign finance reform." She promises to raise taxes even more than Obama, and add to the mountain of regulation already created.

No doubt, the United States remains a great country. But citizen freedom isn't locked in on autopilot. It must be vigorously protected by every generation.