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EDITORIAL: Georgia ‘Freedom’ rankings offer something to chew on

Georgia gets a middling score in libertarian Cato Institute’s “Freedom in the 50 States” rankings, a list that measures such things as the tax burden, regulatory policy and personal freedom.

A dim view of restrictive governmental policies is taken by the “Freedom” authors, William P. Ruger, vice president of policy and research at the Charles Koch Institute and Foundation, and Jason Sorens, lecturer in the Department of Government at Dartmouth College.

“We weight public policies according to the estimated costs that government restrictions on freedom impose on their victims,” assert Ruger and Sorens.

The term “victims” gives you a clue to the libertarian thinking of the authors, who rank the states on more than 200 policies “encompassing fiscal policy, regulatory policy and personal freedom.”

Components of the rankings include:

- fiscal policy, 29.5 to 32 percent — including state and local taxes, government subsidies and debt;
- regulatory policy, 38.7 percent — including land use freedom 10.5 percent and local rent control 6 percent, health insurance freedom 7.4 percent, labor market freedom 5.7 percent (including general right to work 2.8 percent);
- personal freedom, 29.4 percent — including arrests and incarceration 6.6 percent, marriage freedom 4 percent (including same-sex partnership laws counting for 2.2 percent), education 3.2 percent, gun control 3.2 percent, alcohol 2.9 percent (including blue laws, and marijuana freedom 2.1 percent.)

On those policies, Georgia is ranked 22nd among the states, down seven points from the last “Freedom” list in 2012. The state had a low of 27 in 2006 and a high of 12 in 2010. The latest ranking puts Georgia just ahead of Alabama, ranked 23.

As for other states in the Southeast, Tennessee is 6 on the “Freedom” list, Florida is 8, South Carolina 15, and Mississippi 36. The top five are, in order, New Hampshire, Alaska, Oklahoma, Indiana and South Dakota. The bottom five: Maryland at 46, New Jersey 47, Hawaii 48, California 49 and New York 50.

The Cato authors credit Georgia as one of the fastest growing states in the South, “perhaps due in part to one of the best regulatory environments in the region.” In addition, Georgia’s “fiscal situation has been improving as well.”

Other factors cited in Georgia’s favor include: state tax collections, at 4.5 percent of personal income, are significantly below the national average, although local taxes (4.3 percent of income) are a little higher than the average. Subsidies to businesses are lower than the national average and debt is substantially lower, while government employment has declined from 13.2 percent of private jobs in 2010 to 12 percent in 2014.

Georgia “does well on labor and land-use policy,” with a right-to-work law and no minimum wage, “a relatively good civil liability system,” but “does poorly on occupational freedom” — with licensing “a bit broader than the national average, and health care professions face generally tight scope-of-practice rules.”

On personal freedom, the Cato authors cite high incarceration rates and failure to reform civil asset forfeiture sufficiently — but say Georgia is “one of the best states for educational freedom, scores well on gun rights and regulates tobacco use lightly compared with most other states.” And at the end of 2014, “it was also one of the worst states for marriage freedom.”

Thus, policy recommendations by the authors for Georgia include cutting out business subsidies and liberalizing the health care professions, such as allowing dental hygienists to clean teeth without a dentist present in safety-net clinics, nursing homes, school clinics and federally qualified health centers — a freedom allowed in 45 other states.

That’s something to chew on, no doubt, but don’t expect such changes to come about any time soon, the Cato recommendations notwithstanding. Legislation providing for such practice died in the Georgia General Assembly last session because of opposition from the state dental association.

The “Freedom” rankings tell us Georgia has plenty of room for improvement. And that’s up to its citizens. Which brings to mind the oft-quoted admonition: “Eternal vigilance is the price of freedom.”