

Deseret News

The slipping freedom of America and what to do about it

By the Deseret News Editorial Board

Feb 5, 2021, 10:00pm MST

Ask Americans if they think the United States is the freest country in the world, and you're going to get a much different answer depending on the age of the person you talk to.

As pollster Scott Rasmussen found recently, 68% of American voters overall believe the United States provides its citizens with more freedom than just about any other major nation. Break it down by age, however, and it's clear that older people believe this much more than the youngest voters.

Among senior citizens, 80% believe it. Among those ages 18-24, only 44% feel the same.

It's a question that can generate a lot of emotion and, perhaps, too little serious discussion. But the truth is the young people are onto something. By some key measures, freedom has been slipping in the United States in recent years.

As many generations of Americans have learned, freedom isn't a static condition. It must be preserved, protected and promoted anew constantly. It begins to lag as people and governments perceive the need to respond to threats. It wanes as governments assume greater control over pursuits and pocketbooks.

Fortunately, the poll also found that 83% believe it is very important to protect the freedoms and rights of individual Americans. We can agree on the goal. It's the methods that need more attention.

Two credible, yearly studies lend perspective to this issue.

One is the annual Index of Economic Freedom, published by the Heritage Foundation. The index is important because the advance of economic freedom, in all its varieties, has been a catalyst to the dramatic increase in overall freedom worldwide over the last three centuries or more. The index measures this in a variety of ways including government tax burdens, fiscal policies, property rights, protections for the freedom to trade and invest, government regulations and the freedom and independence of the judiciary.

Report ad

Years ago, the United States was firmly entrenched in the world's top 10. By the 2020 index, it had dropped to 17th, behind some newly resurgent countries such as Estonia and Lithuania, as well as Chile and Georgia. Singapore tops the list, followed by Hong Kong, whose freedoms are under threat, and New Zealand.

Why is the U.S. slipping? The report says, “Economic freedom has declined in America over the past decade, primarily because of excessive government spending and intrusive regulation of the health care and financial sectors ...”

It continues, “Reckless deficit spending by Congress and the administration under both parties explains the weakest Index indicators: government spending and fiscal health.”

We have long warned about the long-term problems of deficit spending. Over time, interest on the national debt robs the economy of buying power, which is reflected in wages and the prices of goods. Low interest rates have tempered those effects for the time being, but the problem looms.

Even on the subject of an independent judiciary, the report contains warnings. The United States has low levels of corruption and a reliable system for enforcing contracts. However, “the judicial appointments process is subject to increasing politicization.” This manifests itself more prominently in the Supreme Court nomination process, but also in the backlog of judicial appointments in the Senate, especially whenever that body is controlled by a party separate from that of the White House.

The other index is the Human Freedom Index, published by the Cato Institute, a free-market think tank. Here, the United States also ranks 17th. Major lags on freedom were associated with increases in tariffs, which inhibit business owners from freely conducting commerce and which act as taxes on American consumers. The nation also scored lowest in judicial protections and the size of the federal government, and there are signs that religious freedom is in trouble, particularly where it concerns harassment and physical hostilities.

As the Index of Economic Freedom notes, “Economic freedom is the fundamental right of every human to control his or her own labor and property. In an economically free society, individuals are free to work, produce, consume and invest in any way they please.”

The United States still remains among the freest nations of the world, but its place on that list is not automatic from one generation to the next.

Americans often make the mistake of equating their written guarantees in the Constitution with the nation’s actions. The Constitution is an inspired, groundbreaking document that guarantees basic liberties. But it has always set an ideal the nation has striven to meet, often falling short in many areas.

Young voters are right. Today’s Americans have much work to do to preserve and defend freedom. It cannot be taken for granted.