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M.D. Harmon: U.S. slips a bit in Cato Institute's world freedom standings

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How free are Americans, compared to other nations?

At least one organization that studies international liberties thinks we've slipped a bit in world standings. Why might that be?

Several groups, which range from moderate to conservative to libertarian in their political outlooks, routinely compare nations on rankings of economic, political and civil liberty.

(I'm not sure why groups on the left apparently avoid such rankings. Perhaps the outcomes are not to their liking – but more on that later.)

Here are three of the most prominent ratings:

- On one end is the just-updated Human Freedom Index, published by the Cato Institute and Canada's Fraser Institute, both libertarian-leaning think tanks, and Germany's Liberales Institut, which is associated with that country's Free Democrats, a free-market political party.
- Another is the conservative Heritage Foundation's Index of Economic Freedom, which rates nations in 10 economic categories, including property rights, freedom from corruption, government spending, investment, trade and the like. Political and civil categories are not directly included in this index.
- And as the flip side, Freedom House, a middle-of-the-road think tank, offers Freedom in the World, a rating of nations ranking from 1 (the most free) to 7 (brutal dictatorships) that sets economics aside and ranks civil and political freedoms.

Freedom House and the French group Reporters Without Borders also offer annual Freedom of the Press reports, which tend to parallel other ratings of civil and political liberties.

The recently published Cato study has been making the most stir among liberty buffs, because it dropped the United States to 20th position in 2012 (the most recent year for which figures are available), a decline of three places from its 2008 ranking.

The authors say they "look at 76 indicators in 152 countries to capture the degree to which people are free to engage in voluntary exchange and enjoy major liberties such as freedom of

speech, religion, and association. We also include measures on freedom of movement, women's freedoms, safety and security, and rule of law."

Hong Kong and Switzerland top the list, but even Chile, Malta and Mauritius beat America's ranking.

What happened? "The (U.S.) decline reflects a long-term drop in every category of economic freedom and in rule of law indicators," the authors say. "The U.S. performance is worrisome and shows that the United States can no longer claim to be the leading bastion of liberty in the world."

They add, "In addition to the expansion of the regulatory state and drop in economic freedom, the war on terror, the war on drugs, and the erosion of property rights due to greater use of eminent domain all likely have contributed to the U.S. decline."

Heritage's report isn't quite as damning, putting the United States at 12th in economic freedom, still behind Singapore, Canada and Estonia, as well as Chile and Mauritius again. Hong Kong also wins this report's No. 1 slot, even though there is considerable uncertainty about how much longer its Chinese masters will permit its post-British freedom to continue.

Freedom House ranks nations on its 1-to-7 civil liberties scale in four broad categories: Free, Partly Free, Not Free and Worst of the Worst.

You'll be happy to know Americans get a 1-level ranking in the "Free" group, along with Western Europe, most of South America, and Australia and New Zealand – and India and Mongolia, interestingly enough. Canada's also a 1, while Mexico's a 3, similar to the rest of Central America (except for the 1-ranked nation of Costa Rica, a popular retirement haven for Americans seeking a low-cost version of the good life).

Unsurprisingly, Russia (6), China (6.5) and a good part of Africa populate the "Not Free" list, along with (again there's no surprise) the Marxist prison colony of Cuba (also a 6.5, with a 7 for political rights). It is the only "Not Free" country in the Western Hemisphere.

(As I noted above, this may be why progressives don't rank nations by their freedoms – it would be embarrassing for their statist philosophy. For example, Venezuela, touted by progressives who thought the late dictator Hugo Chavez was a model leader, ranks 144th out of 152 countries in Cato's Human Freedom Index, and is tied with Haiti with solid 5s on the Freedom House scale.)

The Worst of the Worst? The Central Asian "republics" of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, along with the Sudan and the Central African Republic, and our longtime ally, Saudi Arabia, get 7s across the board.

What conclusions can be teased out of all this number-mongering? The United States remains a fairly free place to live, all in all – but the trend in the past seven years seems to be heading in the wrong direction.

Is there something coming up soon that would let us turn that around?