
George Mason University's Freedom Index is Anti-Gun

Posted on September 16, 2011 by Robert Farago

There are lies, damned lies and statistics. In this case, the people telling porky pies hail from George Mason University's Mercatus Center. Of course, they wouldn't say that their "Freedom Index" is a lie. [Click [here](#) to download the pdf] Simply that it represents their view of what makes a state free. "Essentially, this variable captures a wide range of policies, from concealed- and open-carry regulations to assault weapons bans, waiting periods, gun show and private sale regulations, licensing of gun owners, registration of firearms, trigger locks, and more." So, you ask, how do they rate firearms freedom and how does it figure in the big picture? Read on .

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The pie chart (page 46) shows that gun laws account for 1/15th of the total Freedom Index data. The appendix (page 48) shows that the authors have created a familiar Trojan horse. The headline: they value the right to keep and bear arms. The specifics: not so much. In fact, states with strong not-to-say-draconian gun control laws are valued more highly than those that don't.

For example, the study gives a point for a state-guarantee of the right to keep and bear arms. And awards another point to those states with an assault weapons and/or high capacity magazine ban. And another for firearms purchase restrictions (i.e. "gun a month" laws). And another point for "ballistic identification requirements."

Background checks at gun shows? Point given. Ban on .50 caliber rifles? On point. Waiting period? Wait for it . . . another point. "Stricter minimum age to purchase or possess firearms than federal standard?" Pointless? Not in this case. There's more, but I think you get the point.

Or not. Why in the world would a study on relative freedom reward states with gun control? Answer: it shouldn't. But here's their rationale:

Our mission is to generate knowledge and understanding of how institutions affect the freedom to prosper and hold organizations accountable for their impact on that freedom. The aim of our work is to enable individuals to live free, prosperous, and peaceful lives.

The road to hell, eh?

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About Robert Farago

Robert Farago is the Publisher and Managing Editor of The Truth About Guns (TTAG). He started the site to explore the ethics, morality, business, politics, culture, technology, practice, strategy, dangers and fun of guns.

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15 Responses to *George Mason University's Freedom Index is Anti-Gun*



BLAMMO says:

June 11, 2011 at 9:52 AM

Still, given all their rationalized but arbitrary standards of measure, the states that consistently occupy the bottom 10 on most of the lists are progressive states on the northeast and west coasts. Guess you can only cook something so much.

[Reply](#)



JOE MATAFOME says:

June 11, 2011 at 10:41 AM

How embarrassing that RI is in the same group as the commie loving "PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC'S OF NY, NY AND CAL" I'll never make fun of MA again.

[Reply](#)



Jason says:

June 11, 2011 at 12:07 PM

You're misreading it.

These are not "points", they're just codings. "1" is just another way of saying "yes" to a question. There's no value judgement implied. You can see this in the drug section as well. Both marijuana legalization and restrictions on liquor sales are coded as "yes = 1".

This is confusing, until you realize how they're combining these factors. According to the spreadsheet, they're not just adding or averaging them up. They're calculating the "first, unrotated principal component". This is a statistical method for finding correlations between variables. You take a bunch of variables, map them into dimensions in a multi-dimensional space, and then reducing them to a single number that describes how close the elements (in this case, U.S. states) are to each other. A weird effect of this type of analysis is that it doesn't matter how you measure the dimensions. It's all about their *relative proximity* in multi-dimensional space.

For a simple one-dimensional example, think of it as three cities along a highway, “Kingman, Barstow, San Bernardino,” as the song says. It doesn’t matter if you travel the road from west to east, or east to west, if the mile markers count up or down, or if the country goes metric and changes them to kilometer markers. Their relative positions and the proportions of the distances between them don’t change.

In this case, with this data, you end up with a scale, with Alaska at -3.2, and California at 11.1, and all the other states, somewhere in between. As you can see from page 57, the researchers then use this as a measure of *paternalism*, not freedom.

Because of the statistical method they’re using, the relative rankings would not have turned out any differently if they’d switched any individual question to “Yes = 0, No = 1” or “Yes = 537, No = 1,000,000”. As long as you’re consistent in that question, you’re going to get the same results.

[Reply](#)



John Fritz says:

June 11, 2011 at 12:42 PM

But even looking at the data that way, the yes/no questions they ask are still contradictory. For example, they ask if your state has handgun ownership laws (restrictions). 1=yes. They ask if your state allows charitable gambling. 1=yes. Question one indicates a government restriction on a freedom and question two illustrates a freedom from government intervention.

?

And isn’t paternalism another form of freedom? I think?

[Reply](#)



Jason says:

June 11, 2011 at 12:58 PM

These are not ratings. They’re not points being awarded. They’re arbitrary codings. You could say yes = 0, no = 1, or yes = 1 and no = 0. Or yes = 2011 and no = 1492. And no question depends on any other question. The input scales (0 to 1, 1 to 0, or \$0-414 in the case of the CCW fee question) do not matter. The statistical method they have chosen to use is going to extract the patterns from the data *no matter what scale(s) you use*. And the pattern it’s found is a scale where Alaska is at one end, and California is at the other end, and other states are somewhere in between.

Paternalism (noun) the system, principle, or practice of managing or governing individuals, businesses, nations, etc., in the manner of a father dealing benevolently and often intrusively with his children: The employees objected to the paternalism of the old president.

Considering that California ends up listed as one of the least free states in their final analysis, I think they got it right.

[Reply](#)



Nick Leghorn says:

September 9, 2011 at 2:48 PM

Do I detect a slight bit of confirmation bias?

Looking at the numbers in terms of “firearms freedom” then yes, there is a polarity issue. The point system doesn’t make sense in that context.

But, as you point out, the points count towards “paternalism” instead of “firearms freedom.” In that

context the polarity makes sense and the math works out.

I agree with your analysis, the “points” make sense and the study doesn’t necessarily advocate for more gun control. But I can see where one could make that mistake.

[Reply](#)



Jason says:

June 11, 2011 at 12:48 PM

Edit, that should be page 77, not 57.

[Reply](#)



John Fritz says:

June 11, 2011 at 12:31 PM

The source material for these ratings is schizophrenic. I spent a few minutes reading through their data appendix and their selection criteria doesn’t make any sense. They give props for some jackboot-on-your-neck activity like DUI checkpoints but then turn around and give the same points for video surveillance prohibition. So it’s freedom-4-you if your local LEO routinely violates your 4th amendment rights just as long as they don’t video the event? Then they think gambling is good but give props to state-run liquor stores.

As Robert already pointed out, the gun rating point system is a total sham. And he didn’t mention nearly all the egregious gun control that George is OK with. Like my favorite, retention of sales records (OK, by the way) aka **gun registration**.

I personally do not understand the vision of freedom George Mason is attempting to illustrate. But if you have the time, there are endless WTF moments in that pdf Robert linked for our viewing enjoyment.

[Reply](#)



JP says:

June 11, 2011 at 3:44 PM

Hey, I’m no statistician, but looking at the maps on pages 24 and 25 of the pdf, it looks like ‘points’ are “bad.”
IDK, I can’t make heads or tails of the statistical models, but I live in the PRK and while checking it out in the state-by state breakdown, I saw that they note that “On personal freedoms, California does well or course on same-sex partnerships and marijuana, but it also has the most restrictive gun laws in the country, a highly restrictive policy regime for motorists and smoking bans.” Implying that the gun, car, and smoking laws knock it down.
So... yeah. Maybe I’ve got it all wrong, but this seems like a fairly legit study to me.

[Reply](#)



Texas Deputy says:

June 11, 2011 at 10:36 PM

One of the authors was William Ruger . Does anyone know if he is related to the “original” late Bill Ruger?

I read his bios on his college website and it said nothing about his family.

[Reply](#)



Hoth says:

June 12, 2011 at 7:31 PM

In its description of Ohio it says this... “Gun control laws are relatively poor, though not is a class with Illinois, New Jersey, and others.” Essentially they’re saying gun control in Ohio is bad, but not as bad the states with the strictest gun control laws. To me this would indicate that the authors frown upon gun control.

[Reply](#)



Bob H says:

June 12, 2011 at 8:36 PM

Isn’t one of the TTAG writers an analyst in real life? Could we get his opinion on what the study is doing?

[Reply](#)



Mike says:

June 15, 2011 at 12:20 AM

Jason is correct – I’ll use my home state of Texas as an example.

When you open the page for a state, there are parameters you can set at the bottom of the page. Setting the ‘strictness of gun control index’ to minimum changes Texas from #14 to #10, signifying more personal freedom.

[Reply](#)



Patrick says:

June 15, 2011 at 1:54 AM

Sorry, but I believe the original post has completely missed the mark. This study could be one of the most pro-gun statistical analysis I’ve seen in a long time. I agree with Hoth, Mike and Jason—the study views gun ownership as a personal freedom. Therefore, any gun control is an infringement on the personal freedom and an increase in paternalism (big brotherism?) Just looking at the map and rankings of the overall freedom is like plotting the most restrictive gun laws. Where are the heaviest, craziest gun laws? New York, New Jersey, CALIFORNIA, Maryland, Massachusetts, and Illinois. Those states make up the majority of the “least free” states. The restrictions in those state, including gun control, have become so onerous that many people are migrating in just the directions suggested in the video. In Texas, we are being flooded with refugees from California. However, thanks for posting this. I wouldn’t have known about this study otherwise. Your blog is frequently educational.

[Reply](#)



Jason says:

June 23, 2011 at 4:46 PM

Robert, multiple people have no pointed out your error. You’ve had plenty of time to do additional research yourself, or to even contact the authors for more information. (I’m sure they’d love to talk to a gun blogger.) Yet you have not only not done this, you’ve let your original post stand without correction or retraction, much less apology.

You’ve made a serious charge here. Most academics would rather be accused of carnal knowledge of chickens than of fudging their data. And even if they were going to fudge, it’s an insult to their intelligence to claim that they’d do so in such a transparent and easily detectable way. You’re basically accusing them of being both dishonest *and* stupid. And although it shouldn’t even make a difference, these are people who are *on your side*.

I initially believed you’d done this out of ignorance. There’s nothing wrong with ignorance. It just means “not knowing things”.

It's not a moral failing. But now you know. You can no longer plead ignorance. The longer you let this stand, the more it becomes an issue of personal integrity. Man up. Issue a retraction and an apology.

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