

North Idaho does well in Idaho Freedom Index

By Wayne Hoffman

A reporter from the New York Times recently asked me about a piece of Nanny Government legislation and, with childlike innocence, conveyed his belief in fairy tales that might include fields of frolicking unicorns, pots of gold at the end of rainbows and the “the conservative Idaho Legislature.”

The reporter asked me to predict the fate of a bill to ban minors from using tanning beds—a bill that we very much opposed.

“But that bill doesn’t stand a chance, right?” posed the reporter. “After all, Idaho’s Legislature is the most conservative in the nation.”

“What makes you think it’s the most conservative in the nation?” I asked.

“Well, it’s the most Republican,” the reporter replied.

“What makes you think it’s the most conservative?” I prodded.

Of course, you can’t blame the reporter in this case. Many in the state, too, have heard the Myth of the Conservative Idaho Legislature. We almost believe it is true.

That’s the main reason why we created the Idaho Freedom Index. The Freedom Index works like this: We consider freedom a linear proposition. A legislator might vote to expand government or create a new regulation or enact a new fee on private industry. But we wondered, “Does that legislator vote for freedom as much as he or she votes to expand government?” So we analyzed every bill that impacted—positively or negatively—freedom, free markets, economic opportunity and government regulation. Bills with a negative impact on freedom got a number negative. Bills that impacted freedom positively got a positive number. And then we totaled the results by legislator.

What we found is this: Slightly more than half of the members of the House have a voting record that favors less government and more freedom. Nineteen Republicans joined with a dozen Democrats to make up an anti-free market voting bloc in the 70-member chamber.

Of the 35-member Senate, only seven members had a voting record that favored freedom and free markets. Some senators might have done better if only committee chairmen allowed hearings on pro-free market bills, like those that curtail urban renewal and allow insurance to be sold across state lines.

Bob Nonini, R-Coeur d’Alene, was the top freedom-supporting legislator in the House. Sen. Monty Pearce, R-New Plymouth, took the top spot in the Senate. The legislators who favored Big Government the most were Shirley Ringo, D-Moscow, in the House and Michelle Stennett, D-Ketchum, in the Senate.

District 3's Sen. Steve Vick and Reps. Vito Barbieri and Phil Hart had voting records that made for a combined No. 2 most freedom-focused legislative district in the state.

District 2 Reps. Dick Harwood and Shannon McMillan also registered solid free market voting records, but their senator, Joyce Broadsword, weighted the district down to No. 9 because Broadsword collected the second least free market voting record in the Senate.

Rep. Nonini's strong showing in District 5 and his colleague, Rep. Frank Henderson's positive number, helped offset the negative numbers from their senator, Jim Hammond.

District 4 Rep. Kathy Sims' strong pro-free market voting record helped offset the negative numbers from Rep. Marge Chadderdon and Sen. John Goedde.

District 1 has the distinction of being the only north Idaho legislative district where the three-member legislative delegation's combined Freedom Index scores add up to a negative. Reps. Eric Anderson and George Eskridge's weak-but-still free-market oriented records did not total enough to offset the negative numbers generated by Sen. Shawn Keough.

Every year in every legislative session, lawmakers are confronted with attacks on freedom. They might be seemingly small attacks (a fee increase here, an expanded regulation there) or big attacks (a new government agency, a higher tax). But the Legislature meets every winter, and enacts dozens of new laws with every meeting. Freedom is a linear proposition. And if the Idaho Legislature has a natural tendency to gravitate toward statism, we can beam with pride that we have "the Most Conservative Legislature in the Nation" or we can insist the label actually mean something—and that votes for freedom be the most prized legislative accomplishment of all.