

STATE INTEGRITY 2015

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# WYOMING GETS F GRADE IN 2015 STATE INTEGRITY INVESTIGATION

## Cowboy spirit pervades state government

Brielle Schaeffer

### The State Integrity Investigation

(<https://www.publicintegrity.org/accountability/state-integrity-investigation/state-integrity-2015>) is a comprehensive assessment of state government accountability and transparency done in partnership with Global Integrity. (<https://www.globalintegrity.org/>)

### Wyoming

GRADE: **F**<sub>(51)</sub> RANK: **49**<sup>TH</sup>

Assessing the systems in place to deter corruption in state government

Click on each category for more detail

[OUR METHODOLOGY](#)

#### Public Access to Information

GRADE: **F**<sub>(23)</sub> RANK: **50**<sup>TH</sup>

#### Political Financing

GRADE: **F**<sub>(37)</sub> RANK: **48**<sup>TH</sup>

#### Electoral Oversight

GRADE: **F**<sub>(57)</sub> RANK: **40**<sup>TH</sup>

#### Executive Accountability

GRADE: **F**<sub>(47)</sub> RANK: **17**<sup>TH</sup>

Nothing encapsulates Wyoming more than its logo of a bucking horse and rider, which adorns everything from license plates to the insignia of the state's only four-year university.

It's easy to imagine a lone cowboy on his horse galloping across the barren landscape in this state, and that's still a regular sight here. The Wild West lives on in Wyoming in fields of sagebrush, roaming bison, swaths of vast ranchland, craggy Teton Mountains and even in its bustling oil and gas fields.

Nicknamed the "Cowboy State" for good reason, Wyoming even has cowboy ethics signed into law as the official state code. Former Gov. Dave Freudenthal made the 10 principles of "Cowboy Ethics," from Jim Owen's book of the same name, the guideline for Wyoming in 2010. Among these principles: "Do what has to be done"; "Be tough, but fair"; and, "When you make a promise, keep it."

The passionate individualism and stark independence of the cowboy spirit dominate the state's politics as well. There are few laws infringing on personal liberties in Wyoming, and the statutes that the state does have can be decidedly vague. Bureaucracy and intrusive government are frowned upon here, privacy prized. As a result, open meetings and public records laws, as well as disclosure requirements for campaigns, elected officials and lobbyists are purposefully weak.

And so Wyoming gets a grade of F and a numerical score of 51 from the **State Integrity Investigation** (<https://www.publicintegrity.org/accountability/state-integrity-investigation/state-integrity-2015>) , an assessment of state government accountability and transparency by the Center for Public Integrity and Global Integrity, **ranking it 49th among the states** (<https://www.publicintegrity.org/2015/11/03/18822/how-does-your-state-rank-integrity>) . The result is not much different from where the Cowboy State stood in the 2012 investigation — **an F grade, a numerical score of 52 and a No. 48 ranking** (<https://www.publicintegrity.org/2012/03/19/18229/wyoming-gets-f-grade-2012-state-integrity-investigation>) . The two scores are not directly comparable, however, due to changes made to improve and update the project and methodology, such as eliminating the category for redistricting, a process that generally occurs only once every 10 years.

## **Small-town state**

There's a saying in the Cowboy State commonly credited to former Gov. Mike Sullivan — "Wyoming is a small town with really long streets."

It is the least populated state in the union with a mere 580,000 residents, according to the 2014 estimate from the U.S. Census Bureau. That's fewer than six people for each of the state's nearly 100,000 square miles of ranchland, rolling hills and craggy peaks.

The small-town vibe carries over to politics, said Jim Angell, executive director of the Wyoming Press Association. Lawmakers can't get away with too much because their constituents hold them accountable, he said.

"They go home and have to face their voters the next day," he said. That sort of informal oversight is just how it's done here — and there aren't many folks arguing for major changes.

In the 125 years of Wyoming statehood, the only government worker ever convicted of a bribery charge was former Insurance Commissioner Gordon W. Taylor in 1990.

"Some may say that's a lack of prosecution but I say it's a lack of mean-spiritedness and criminal intent," Angell said.

Fair enough. But while the people may have good intentions, according to Angell, there's also a laissez faire attitude toward enforcement of certain laws, which contributes to the state's poor transparency and accountability, at least according to the numbers.

## **Executive accountability and ethics**

Wyoming's governor and state cabinet officials have never been prosecuted for alleged crimes, but the former State Superintendent of Public Instruction, Cindy Hill, did come under fire. The Legislature investigated her in 2013 after reports of cronyism in her department, and allegations that she used the state plane for

personal purposes and misused federal grant funds. As a result of other concerns over her job performance, Gov. Matt Mead signed a law stripping Hill of her elected duties and removing her from managing the state education department. Hill subsequently sued the state and won when the state supreme court overturned the law, ruling it was unconstitutional. Hill returned to office in March of 2014, and finished out her elected term in January.

No criminal charges emerged from the legislative probe, but Hill was officially reprimanded by lawmakers for her conduct.

Outcomes aside, the legislative investigation highlighted the fact that the state does not have an independent ethics enforcement agency to handle such allegations.

“We lack any sophisticated statutes to provide for that authority, and as a result, we had some difficulties in this instance,” Sen. Chris Rothfuss, told the *Casper Star-Tribune* in July 2014. “Perhaps that is a lesson learned, but I don’t know that we will take that sort of action.”

Indeed, although lawmakers talked of improving the system, the Legislature has yet to propose any bills that would create an independent ethics agency or commission to deal with complaints against elected officials.

### **Public information**

In addition to widespread accountability weaknesses, Wyoming also has flaws in its open meetings and public records laws. Also called the Equality State, Wyoming came in dead last in the State Integrity Investigation’s access to information category.

“We don’t have the tools that would help people enforce public documents and other sunshine laws,” Angell said. “We have nobody in the state attorney general’s office to hear appeals for documents or public meetings.”

Wyoming statute gives citizens the right to access government information in a general sense, but the law specifically exempts the state legislature and the

entire judicial branch. And there seem to be many remaining gray areas in regard to what is or isn't considered public record.

For example, under the current Public Records Act, University of Wyoming student emails are considered public because they are sent on a state server. Lawmakers considered a proposal earlier this summer to exclude student emails from that law but decided instead to have a committee look into the matter. The group is examining the public records law and will present recommendations to the Legislature's Digital Information Privacy Task Force this fall. Student email disclosure came up earlier this year when the *Laramie Boomerang* newspaper requested undergraduates emails from university officials about a proposal to have guns on campus.

### **Big money**

Conversely, Wyoming placed highly for the transparency of its state budgeting process with a score of 93, which ranked the state at No. 3 in that category.

Wyoming, rich in oil and gas resources, has a biennial budget of \$9.3 billion that is bolstered by sales tax, property tax and revenue from mineral production. The Cowboy State does not run a deficit, even though there is no personal income or corporate income tax in Wyoming.

The state's Consensus Revenue Estimating Group publishes quarterly reports on revenues collected and money spent in January, April, July and October. In January, for example, the group projected a \$222 million deficit for the 2016 fiscal year mainly due to low oil and natural gas prices. The governor also publishes mid-budget reviews to discuss changes in economic assumptions that would affect approved budget policies.

Lawmakers are also heavily involved in the budget process. They generally vote on all departmental budgets, on certain line items and on the executive's overall budget proposal.

"We have quite lengthy discussions about \$1,000 or \$1,500 items," Rep. Ruth Ann Petroff, a Republican, said.

That’s the way it might happen in a modest municipality. And that’s the way it *does* happen in this small town with really long streets.



Guest

NILES



I recently moved here from the East Coast. The enforcement of environmental regulations is egregious. For all it’s beauty, the ignorance perpetuated here regarding chemical disposal, water quality, recycling, etc., is chilling. I do like that you have so much access to representatives and organizations, but lobbying for change is difficult. Often it seems like people get elected based off the idea of who they are rather than what they can do. Other times people get elected because they’re familiar, even if they’ve performed poorly as a civil servant. In both cases, I’ve heard these officials gripe about how they... [Read more »](#)

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