Yankee Thrift
Are we truly a bunch of cold-hearted cheapskates in Massachusetts?

By Patrick Doyle | Boston Magazine | April 2013

Last August, the Chronicle of Philanthropy published a study showing that New England was home to the six least charitable states in the country—Massachusetts ranked 47th. The conservative bloggerati nearly had a heart attack of joy. Jeff Jacoby, as is his wont, went apoplectic in the Globe, deriding the “stingy liberals” around here, and proclaiming that all of our blue-state talk of equality, fairness, and helping one another was total hogwash. Except it wasn’t.

“The Chronicle of Philanthropy’s ratings were not very accurate or substantial,” says Paul Schervish, the director of Boston College’s Center on Wealth and Philanthropy. “It was an attempt to do something that was entertaining.”

To start with, the Chronicle included religious giving in its rankings, despite the fact that a good portion of church donations go not to the poor but to things like church services. When such giving was removed, the Chronicle acknowledged, the Northeast was actually the most generous region in the country, giving 1.4 percent of its discretionary income to secular charities.

Beyond that, the Chronicle survey included only people with incomes of more than $50,000 (which eliminates half of America) and people who itemize their deductions (which is done by about a third of the country). In fact, the study took into account just two-thirds of overall individual annual giving. And the Chronicle also used some less-than-fair estimates of cost of living, which punished people in expensive areas—like the Northeast.

In fact, when Schervish released his own study—one that included estimates of non-itemized giving—Massachusetts ranked as the 13th-most-generous state in the country.

Even in the BC rankings, though, Maine and New Hampshire remained among the bottom three states. Our cheap neighbors are killing our reputation.

Find out more about Boston’s philanthropy scene in our 2013 Power package.