

## **Tulane economist among those highlighting civil discourse at New Orleans Book Festival**

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Douglas N. Harris, professor and chair of economics in the School of Liberal Arts, will discuss his State of the Nation project in a panel at the 2026 New Orleans Book Festival at Tulane University.

In addition to bestselling authors, culinary stars and Family Day celebrations, the [New Orleans Book Festival at Tulane University](#) will offer opportunities to explore the importance of civil discourse in today's society.

Among the scholars helping lead such explorations is Douglas N. Harris, professor and chair of economics in Tulane University's School of Liberal Arts. Harris' research examines public policy through data-driven analysis.

In a panel moderated by President Michael A. Fitts, who announced this week plans for the [Tulane Center for Civil Discourse](#), Harris will discuss his State of the Nation project, which brought together former appointees and advisers from five presidential administrations, both Democratic and Republican, to evaluate how the United States is performing across economic, social, civic and other measures. The project also solicited feedback from about 1,000 residents throughout the country across the political spectrum. One aim of the [State of the Nation](#) project was to see how much common ground there might be on shared definitions and measures of progress.

“The State of the Nation project offers one of the most bipartisan, evidence-based snapshots of American progress in recent memory,” Fitts said. “Answering the basic question of ‘how are we doing as a nation’ is the first step in fostering constructive dialogue and debate on the most effective ways to move our country forward.”

The State of the Nation project found that while disagreements exist, Americans share more common ground than the political climate often suggests. Even as dislike of opposing political parties has grown, public views on national priorities align more closely than many assume, according to Harris’ findings. He said those findings offer reason for hope and reinforce the belief that progress is possible.

Harris’ Book Fest session will describe the main findings of the State of the Nation project and explore the possible reasons behind the country’s successes and failures from the perspective of authors who have examined related themes in their books.

Joining Harris on the panel will be Gary Hoover, professor of economics and executive director of the Murphy Institute at Tulane University, and Carol Graham, senior fellow in the Economic Studies program at the Brookings Institution and senior scientist at Gallup. Hoover is the author of "Ladder or Lottery: Economic Promises and the Reality of Who Gets Ahead." Graham wrote "Happiness for All? Unequal Lives and Hopes in Pursuit of the American Dream."

Harris said the Book Festival provides the kind of setting where collaboration and civil engagement can thrive at a time when many public conversations are marked by division.

“The Book Fest encourages civil discourse,” Harris said, emphasizing that the festival allows people to discuss complex issues without reducing them to partisan

talking points. “The festival also fosters an environment centered on ideas and discussion, where attendees are more willing to listen, ask questions and engage thoughtfully, even when perspectives differ.”

Rebuilding trust in public discourse begins with conversations that prioritize understanding over winning arguments, he said.

Harris is currently working on a State of the State report, breaking down the national averages from the original State of the Nation report into individual state analyses and examining patterns across states. The report will also continue to explore one of the key findings from the original report — the growing disconnect between Americans’ economic success and the decline in happiness and other broader measures of well-being.

“Without a clear, accurate and unifying diagnosis of the most pressing issues facing the nation, there can be little hope for sensible solutions,” Harris said.

[The New Orleans Book Festival](#) will take place March 12-15 on Tulane’s uptown campus and will bring together authors, scholars, journalists and community members for discussions spanning literature, history, politics and culture.