



A+ or F-? How a Bipartisan Commission Rated the State of the Nation



The word “bipartisan” seems quaint and anachronistic in this moment.

But a new endeavor publicly launched last month and led by NEPC Fellow [Douglas Harris](#) of Tulane University brings together a politically diverse set of scholars and aims to find some common ground.

Based on a consensus created via feedback from these scholars and coupled with input from a cross-section of about 1,000 everyday Americans, [The State of the Nation](#) project selected 37 metrics to assess how the United States performs relative to other countries. Researchers then tracked these measures back to the 1990s.

The big takeaway? Even as America’s economy thrived relative to the economies of other countries, living standards have failed to improve for its residents.

For example, our nation’s [productivity](#) (real gross domestic product per hour worked) is higher than that of 88 percent of comparable nations. Yet our rates of income inequality, poverty, child death, murder, suicide, belief in democracy, polarization, and drug overdoses are among the worst in the so-called developed world. And on many of these measures of well-being, we are falling farther behind.

“If there is one overarching theme, it’s that we’re pulling apart—economically, socially and politically,” Harris [told](#) *The New York Times*. The report card was originally his idea, according to the *Times*.

When it comes to international comparisons of educational outcomes, the U.S. is often demonized. Yet the [report card ranks](#) the U.S. in the top 50 percent, using a diverse but limited set of measures that include (a) eighth-grade scale scores in five subjects on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, (b) the share of young adults employed or in school, and (c) average years of education. On one of those measures (average years of education), our nation outpaces 86 percent of comparable nations. That trend is improving for Americans.

The project's goal is for the data to be a starting point, rather than an endpoint, during an era in which Americans who hold different political views often differ not only in their beliefs but in the things they consider to be facts. As the project's website states:

The fact that such a wide-ranging group could agree on so much is remarkable and suggests that there is more agreement in our country than the media and other public conversations suggest. This means we have more opportunities for progress than the media and political conversations suggest. While we cannot measure our way to success, we do need a compass.

At the risk of undermining the bipartisan sentiment behind the project, however, we should note here the [very serious threat](#) to any future compass-building. Federal data collection and data sharing provided the [foundation](#) to this research project—and almost all other national data analyses. Let's hope Prof. Harris and his colleagues have facts they can turn to when they again seek common ground.

International and Comparative Education

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