

Cross-country Findings from Spencer-funded study: The Development of
Ethical Civic Actors in Divided Societies: Northern Ireland, South Africa, and the
United States

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We ask how adolescents in Northern Ireland, South Africa, and the United States perceive and interpret civic action, and how they engage as civic actors when legacies of conflict and division impede or enhance how they develop as citizens. We are finding dramatic and consequential differences, with students in South Africa the most civically engaged, followed by students in the United States. Students in Northern Ireland show the least amount of civic engagement.

Although there are exceptions, young people in South Africa generally have a more sophisticated understanding of civic engagement than their counterparts in the United States or Northern Ireland. Aware of the many processes put in place in the 1990s to ensure the health of their emerging democracy, they also know a lot about democracy and appreciate its affordances. Importantly, the identity-based divisions that animate South Africa are clearly present even as young people demonstrate greater awareness and civic efficacy as compared to their peers overseas. Though students from all groups are able to identify recent events and relate them to the past in meaningful ways, the students differ by identity group in terms of their perceptions of these legacies and their implications. These differences have implications for their roles as ethical civic actors and reveal ongoing divisions across groups that highlight the fissures in South African society.

Students in Northern Ireland, Protestants and Catholics alike, who are the least civically engaged, are also the least hopeful about their futures. They express a lack of understanding and awareness about the past and about ongoing conflicts.

They also believe that their political and social contexts will not change. Some say that they feel outside of what is taking place around them even when they are in the thick of it. Unlike South African students who are able, across identity groups, to make connections between current events and their relationships to the past, Northern Irish youth are largely confused by current events and see the past as relatively mysterious and not entirely understandable.

The US students fall in the middle with respect to civic engagement but are closer to the South Africans than to the Northern Irish. The US students tend to take their older democracy for granted and feel less pressure than the South Africans do to understand democratic structures and to contribute to them. This is especially true for white and more privileged youth who generally are doubtful about the relationship between historical legacies and present events, and who do not think that history relates to identity in ways that matter so much today. By contrast, African American and Latino students in focus groups and in a class we are studying are sensitive to how past legacies continue to influence current events and life opportunities, particularly for brown and black Americans. Paradoxically, though, on surveys, African Americans and Latinos report being less likely to engage in democratically-focused civic activities than their Asian and white counterparts. African Americans further report that their schools do not support them well with respect to learning about civic engagement. When we observed classrooms where students of color are well supported, we find them highly

engaged in civic issues and projects aimed at preserving democratic rights for all citizens.