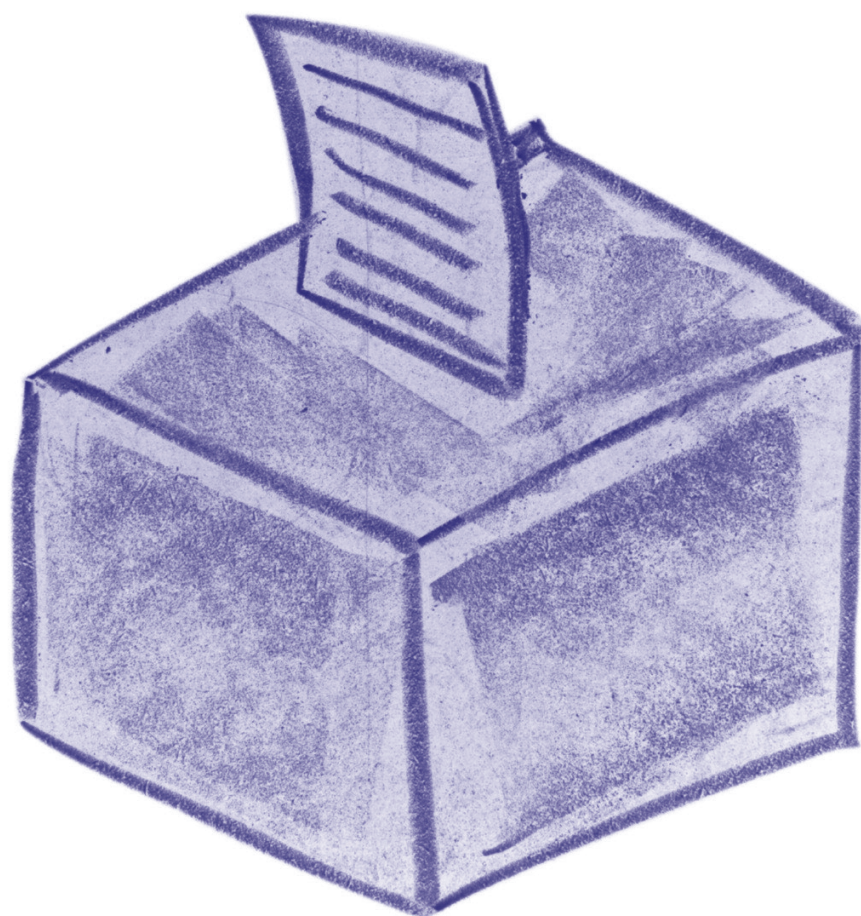


# **Students and the 2015 general election: Did they make a difference?**

Nick Hillman

*With a Foreword by  
**John Denham***



**HEPI Report 78**



## **Foreword**

The Rt Hon. John Denham,  
former Secretary of State for Universities,  
Innovation and Skills

There is much mythmaking about the student vote. Claims to have mobilised the students, or to have been undone by them, are common. But the evidence base is thin, with little hard insight into how and why students vote. The HEPI analysis is a useful step in distinguishing myth from fact. It is by no means clear that students vote on 'student issues'. Many are looking to their own futures after college, sharing the same concerns as other voters.

In one way, students are distinct: they are hard for political parties to contact. Parties like to build up a relationship with voters over time: on the doorstep, by letter, phone or e-mail. Students are transient, not even staying at the same address for three years. In 2015, the change to Individual Electoral Registration meant universities no longer automatically registered many students. Thousands of students were unregistered when the election campaign began. Many did sign up, but were away for Easter.

Political parties had less than two weeks to contact named students, to identify voting intention and, maybe important, advise them in which constituency to vote. How much effect this had we can't know, but excluding so many young people from a relationship with democratic parties cannot be healthy.



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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### The national picture

1. The May 2015 UK general election proved that election predictions are difficult. According to the British Polling Council, 'all the pollsters underestimated the Conservative lead over Labour'.<sup>1</sup>

2. It is not the first time that pre-election opinion polls have been a poor guide to the result. It also occurred in April 1992 and February 1974.<sup>2</sup> Yet changes to the way polls are compiled were thought to have improved their accuracy, so their failure in 2015 was more surprising.<sup>3</sup>

3. The final poll-of-polls suggested the two biggest parties would each secure around one-third of the votes in Great Britain.<sup>4</sup> In the final eight polls, the vote share varied from 31 per cent to 36 per cent for the Conservatives and from 31 per cent to 35 per cent for Labour. But, on average, they put the vote share for each party at an identical 33.6 per cent.<sup>5</sup> This would have been a fall since 2010 for the Conservatives of 2.5 per cent and a rise for Labour of 4.6 per cent.

4. Three of the polls put the Conservatives ahead, two put Labour ahead and three put them level.<sup>6</sup> All were wrong. (See Appendix 1.) Some were inside the 3 per cent margin of error on a standard poll but, according to Peter Kellner of YouGov, using that excuse 'would be to evade the truth and insult the readers'.<sup>7</sup>

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#### *Final pre-election poll of polls, 2015*

	<b>Con</b>	<b>Lab</b>	<b>Lib Dem</b>	<b>UKIP</b>	<b>Green</b>	<b>Other</b>
Poll of polls	33.6%	33.6%	9.0%	13.0%	4.8%	6.1%
Election result (GB)	37.8%	31.2%	8.1%	12.9%	3.8%	6.3%
Difference	4.2%	-2.4%	-0.9%	-0.1%	-1.0%	0.2%

Based on British Polling Council, 'General Election: 7 May 2015', Press release, 8 May 2015 (<http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/general-election-7-may-2015/>)

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5. On election day, both parties increased their UK vote share on 2010, but the result was decisive: 36.9 per cent for the Conservatives (up 0.8 per cent) and 30.4 per cent for Labour (up 1.5 per cent).<sup>8</sup> The Conservatives were 6.5 per cent ahead of their rivals and David Cameron achieved the rare feat for a sitting Prime Minister of securing a larger vote share and more seats in the House of Commons.<sup>9</sup>

6. The two big parties did better in England than in the UK overall, which partly reflects the success of the Scottish National Party (SNP). In England, the Conservatives' vote rose to 40.9 per cent (up 1.4 per cent on 2010) and Labour's rose to 31.6 per cent (up 3.6 per cent).<sup>10</sup>

7. The *May2015* website, run by the *New Statesman*, had suggested the Conservatives would win between 271 and 285 of the 650 seats and that Labour would win between 262 and 273.<sup>11</sup> This would have meant a hung Parliament in which the two biggest parties vied for power either as a minority government or as part of an arrangement with another party (or parties). In fact, the Conservatives won 98 more seats than Labour – 330 versus 232 – and secured a majority over all other parties of 12 seats. As the Speaker does not vote and Sinn Féin's four MPs do not take their seats, the working majority is larger.

## **Students as voters**

8. Although student voters are often regarded as susceptible to targeted commitments, such as promises on student finance, and are thought to be a powerful electoral bloc, their electoral impact is an under-researched area. For example, students have rarely had more than the briefest of mentions in the Nuffield study of each election. In a report published in December 2014, HEPI considered the impact of the new system of Individual Electoral Registration (IER) on students, assessed their likely voting behaviour and made some predictions on which constituencies in England (but not other parts

of the UK) could change hands at the 2015 election as a result of students voting differently to the electorate as a whole.

9. It is important to revisit our conclusions in the light of the election results and to provide an updated assessment on the power of the student vote for three reasons.

- First, the UK will have a referendum on membership of the European Union (EU) before the end of 2017. Universities UK, the body representing vice-chancellors, have opted to play a full part on the pro-EU side of the debate, which includes telling students to 'make sure you register to vote, and participate in discussions on your campus and in your community'.<sup>12</sup> The potential role of students in the referendum will be better understood if their role in the 2015 election is known.
- Secondly, the original report had extensive media coverage, so it is important to evaluate whether it turned out to be any more accurate than the polls.
- Thirdly, there could be lessons for future election candidates who wish to engage with students and to encourage them to be politically active. For example, because many students registered to vote only in the weeks running up to the election, candidates sometimes found it hard to communicate with them.

10. The HEPI paper rejected the October 2014 claim from the National Union of Students (NUS) that 'Students could swing almost 200 seats at the General Election'.<sup>13</sup> Instead, it found 'there are likely to be five but maybe as many as 11 or 12 constituencies where the student vote could be pivotal in affecting the outcome in 2015'.<sup>14</sup> The accompanying press release said students could 'determine the outcome in only around ten constituencies. But, if the opinion polls are a guide to the next election, then students could just swing the overall result and hold the keys to power'.<sup>15</sup>



11. At one level, most of the predictions on seat outcomes were accurate. In May 2015, eight seats changed hands in line with HEPI's predictions.<sup>16</sup> But the true picture is more complicated because these seats could have changed hands irrespective of students' voting behaviour. There are three reasons why students had less impact on the election result in the seats HEPI identified than was expected.

12. First, the Conservative Party performed strongly in Conservative-held marginal seats with many students that had been targets for the Labour Party. The most striking example is Loughborough, where the Rt Hon Nicky Morgan, the Secretary of State for Education, was regarded as vulnerable to an above average pro-Labour swing among students. On election day, she won the 16<sup>th</sup> biggest increase in the Conservative vote in the UK (7.9 per cent) while Labour fell back by 2.6 per cent.<sup>17</sup>

13. Secondly, the collapse of the Liberal Democrat vote was so dramatic that marginal seats with large numbers of students that were lost by the Liberal Democrats would have changed hands anyway. In 2010, they had secured the votes of around one-in-four voters (23.0 per cent) but in 2015 they won the votes of around only one-in-13 voters (7.9 per cent). They fell from 57 to eight seats, losing 27 to the Conservatives, 12 to Labour and 10 to the SNP. There was not a dramatic difference in the performance of those Liberal Democrats who had rebelled, abstained or backed higher tuition fees in 2010.

14. Thirdly, the Labour Party's commitment to reduce the full-time undergraduate tuition fee cap to £6,000, which was designed to appeal to students (and their families), had limited electoral impact. Labour lost support to the Green Party in the year before the election. Some of this was won back by election day, possibly as a result of the fees policy.<sup>18</sup> Yet Labour failed to win Conservative seats with a large numbers of students as expected and the ones they managed to wrest from the Liberal Democrats would have gone red irrespective of students' voting patterns.

15. Superficially, it is possible to argue that the financial settlement for undergraduates in place since 2012, with higher fees and higher loans, has had as little impact on voting behaviour as it has had on applications for full-time study. However, if those seats HEPI predicted would change hands as a result of student voting patterns did not change hands or changed hands as a result of wider electoral shifts instead, it is still possible that students had an electoral impact.

16. Although the assumptions about which seats students would swing may have been calibrated incorrectly on the basis of flawed opinion polls, students could still have swung other seats. Some of Labour's narrowest victories were in constituencies with large numbers of student voters such as the City of Chester, which they won with a majority of 93. If students had a greater propensity to vote Labour, as seems to be the case, then that would have held down the size of the Conservatives' overall majority and helped ensure Labour did not go backwards on the number of seats won in England. The answer to the question of whether students had the impact expected of them in 2015 is: no, but they may have had a similarly proportionate impact nonetheless.

17. Among those students who were on the electoral roll, turnout was relatively high. Yet it appears that many of them opted to vote at home rather than at their place of study, which may have affected the impact of students voting as a bloc.

18. This analysis of the student vote is put forward tentatively. Other analysis of the election may yield different explanations. Moreover, the data on student voters have shortcomings that may make any conclusions contestable. For example:

- most opinion polls do not provide separate results for full-time students, so the best-available data is often out-of-date;
- the definition of full-time students used by the British Election Study (BES) uses the results of Census 2011 and includes many 16 and 17 year olds who are not old enough to vote; and

- universities have different term dates, which can affect where students are on election day.

## **Precedents and consequences**

19. Governments of various colours have chosen to impose additional costs on students and graduates in order to recoup more of the expense of educating people to a higher level:

- it happened under a majority Conservative Government in 1990, when maintenance loans were introduced;
- it happened under a majority Labour Government in 1998, when tuition fees were reintroduced and maintenance grants were replaced by loans, and again in 2006, when fees were tripled;
- and it happened under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition in 2012, when fees were tripled again.

Coming full circle, it will happen again under a majority Conservative Government in 2016, when maintenance grants are abolished once more in favour of larger maintenance loans.

20. These changes have typically been fiercely opposed by the Opposition of the time, which may have affected election results in individual constituencies. For example, it is thought the Liberal Democrats won Manchester Withington and Leeds North West in 2005 due to 'the extra Labour to Liberal Democrat swing among students.'<sup>19</sup> Yet it is hard to prove higher education policies have ever had a decisive electoral impact on the overall result of any general election. In 1990, the Conservatives controversially introduced a maintenance loan system but won the 1992 election, despite Labour promising to 'replace it with a fairer system of student grants'.<sup>20</sup> In 2005, Labour won despite fierce opposition to their pre-election legislation enabling the introduction of higher tuition fees from 2006.<sup>21</sup>

21. The past is not necessarily a guide to the future. The debts today's students are accruing could cause a political upset at some point. In

2030, those who began higher education when fees first went up to £9,000 will be in their mid-thirties, which is the average age of first-time homebuyers and a typical age for female graduates to have their first child. They will still owe large sums to the Student Loans Company but need money for mortgages and childcare. So they could be susceptible to a populist politician who promises to raise incomes by unwinding student loans – just as Margaret Thatcher used income tax cuts as a powerful political weapon in the 1980s.<sup>22</sup> In the New Zealand election of 2005, Labour scraped home after promising to abolish interest on student loans.<sup>23</sup>

22. Student finance was an issue in the 2015 Labour leadership contest: all four candidates rejected the Labour Party's policy at the 2015 election of reducing the tuition fee cap for full-time undergraduates from £9,000 to £6,000.

- Andy Burnham promised a Commission to 'consider moving away from tuition fees and towards a universal graduate tax model for young people on both the academic and technical routes.'<sup>24</sup>
- Yvette Cooper also backed a graduate tax.<sup>25</sup>
- Jeremy Corbyn, the victor, promised to abolish tuition fees altogether and to retain maintenance grants.
- Liz Kendall said 'children's early years will be my priority as leader, not cutting university tuition fees.'<sup>26</sup>

23. It is an open question whether such policies could be more successful in courting the student vote than Ed Miliband's were. It is similarly open whether George Osborne's commitment to replace means-tested maintenance grants with bigger loans and to freeze the earnings threshold at which repayments begin, as announced in the Summer Budget of 2015, will affect the Conservative share of the vote among students and graduates.<sup>27</sup>

24. No assessment of the role played by students in the 2015 election – even one that focuses primarily on England – is complete without

a reference to Mhairi Black, who was elected as the new SNP Member of Parliament for Paisley and Renfrewshire South. Not only was she the youngest MP since the Great Reform Act of 1832, she was also an undergraduate at the University of Glasgow at the time of her election.

## Chapter 2: HEPI election predictions

25. In December 2014, HEPI assessed the potential impact of students on the 2015 election in England. The paper noted: 'It is not only their numbers and turnout that matter but also how concentrated they are within individual constituencies, as well as their likelihood of voting as a distinct group.'<sup>28</sup>

26. The paper took constituencies where, according to Census 2011, a substantial proportion (13 per cent or more) of the 16-to-74 year old population are in full-time education. These seats were categorised according to their 2010 results and expected changes to students' voting behaviour, as informed by a BES survey undertaken in early 2014, were then applied.

27. This led to the following predictions:

- the six most marginal Conservative-Labour constituencies with large numbers of students could fall to Labour because of the student vote;
- the Conservatives could win two seats with large numbers of students from the Liberal Democrats as a result of students punishing the latter more for the increase in fees; and
- Labour could win four seats with large student populations where they had come second in 2010 from the Liberal Democrats.<sup>29</sup>

28. In addition, HEPI's report included a footnote predicting that in Cambridge the party which had come third in 2010 (Labour) might win in 2015, making a maximum of 13 seats that could change hands purely on the power of the student vote. The report also said the Green Party might hold Brighton Pavilion due to students, making 14 student-related predictions in all.<sup>30</sup>

29. HEPI's pre-election analysis was limited to England, partly because much higher education policy (including student finance) is devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In England alone, 54 seats

changed hands between the 2010 and 2015 general elections:

- 32 were Conservative gains (26 from the Liberal Democrats and six from Labour);
- 21 were Labour gains (11 from the Liberal Democrats and 10 from the Conservatives); and
- a single seat was a UKIP gain from the Conservatives.<sup>31</sup>

30. The 14 constituencies where it was predicted students might make a difference are shown in the tables below, along with the actual results and other information, such as the proportion of full-time students, the swing and turnout.<sup>32</sup>

### Conservative:Labour marginals

*Seats that were predicted to shift from Conservative to Labour<sup>33</sup>*

% of adults who are full-time students	Seat	2010 majority	2015 result	Con	Lab	Lab:Con swing	2015 majority	2015 turnout
13.5%	Hendon	0.2%	Con hold	+6.7%	-0.6%	3.7%	7.5%	65.9%
21.7%	Lancaster & Fleetwood	0.8%	Lab gain	+3.2%	+7.0%	-1.9%	3.0%	67.4%
14.4%	Lincoln	2.3%	Con hold	+5.1%	+4.3%	0.4%	3.1%	63.2%
20.2%	Plymouth Sutton & Devonport	2.6%	Con hold	+3.5%	+5.0%	-0.8%	1.1%	65.5%
15.0%	Brighton Kemptown	3.1%	Con hold	+2.7%	+4.3%	-0.8%	1.5%	66.8%
20.8%	Loughborough	7.1%	Con hold	+7.9%	-2.6%	5.3%	17.7%	69.2%
	<b>England</b>	<b>11.5%</b>		<b>1.4%</b>	<b>3.6%</b>	<b>-1.1%</b>	<b>9.3%</b>	<b>65.9%</b>

31. Only one of the six seats which HEPI said might shift from Conservative to Labour because of the student vote actually did so (Lancaster & Fleetwood). Given that the new Labour MP for Lancaster & Fleetwood, Cat Smith, was one of the thirty-six Labour MPs who nominated Jeremy Corbyn, her victory had a rapid impact. But all the other student-heavy seats where a change of party was predicted changed hands in the way expected. The Liberal Democrats lost two student-heavy seats to the Conservatives and five seats to Labour. Moreover, Brighton Pavilion stayed Green.

32. Overall, eight seats with lots of students that were expected to change hands did so, within the predicted range of five to 11 or 12. This had a direct impact on the size of the majority of the incoming Conservative Government: if the Conservatives had lost the other five seats Labour were predicted to win, their overall majority would have been two rather than 12 (and probably unworkable).

33. The specific predictions that turned out to be false reflect the poll-beating performance of the Conservatives. In all the Conservative seats expected to fall to Labour as a result of students' voting behaviour (including the one they lost), their vote share increased. Indeed, it went up by more than the average across England. In four of them, Labour's vote share also grew by more than the English average but in two it fell.

34. On average, the swing from Labour to the Conservatives in these six seats ranged from 5.3 per cent in Loughborough to -1.9 per cent in Lancaster & Fleetwood. On average, the swing was 1.0 per cent towards the Conservatives while, in England overall, the swing was 1.1 per cent towards Labour. So only one of the six seats had a swing from the Conservatives to Labour that surpassed the national swing in England.



35. There does not appear to have been a close correlation between the size of the swing and the proportion of students in an area. In Lancaster and Fleetwood, where the proportion of students in the adult population is around 22 per cent, the Conservatives' vote share increased by 3.2 per cent. In Loughborough, where the proportion of students is similar, their vote share rose by 7.9 per cent. As the Conservative candidate was a one-term sitting MP in both seats, incumbency does not explain the difference.

36. Alongside Nicky Morgan's success in Loughborough, the result in Hendon stands out as particularly impressive for the Conservatives. It was one of London's most marginal seats and a blogger described it in 2014 as 'the seat it will be easiest for Labour to gain next year.'<sup>34</sup> Yet the Conservative vote rose by 6.7 per cent and the Labour vote share fell marginally (by 0.6 per cent) on a day when Labour generally did relatively well in London as a whole, with their vote growing 7.1 per cent.

37. One notable seat which did not feature in the HEPI predictions was Ilford North. The Conservative candidate was the only Tory who lost their job (as a Parliamentary Private Secretary) after refusing to vote in favour of £9,000 tuition fees, instead opting to abstain. But Lee Scott was defeated by Wes Streeting, a former President of the NUS (2008-2010), on a Conservative to Labour swing of 6.4 per cent. This was nearly double the swing across London as a whole (3.4 per cent) and almost six times the swing in England. As 10.3 per cent of Ilford North residents aged 16-to-74 in Census 2011 were full-time students (amounting to over 7,500 people) and the margin of victory was 589 votes, it is eminently plausible that students nudged the victor over the winning line.

38. Two other marginal seats with a relatively high proportion of students (Southampton Itchen and Derby North) for which HEPI had

made no firm prediction also fell from Labour to the Conservatives. Across the UK, Labour won more seats from the Conservatives (10) than the Conservatives won from Labour (8). So it is particularly striking that Labour did not do better in Conservative:Labour marginal seats with many students.<sup>35</sup>

## Lib Dem:Conservative marginals

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*Seats that were predicted to shift from Liberal Democrat to Conservative*

% of adults who are full-time students	Seat	2010 majority	2015 result	Lib Dems	Con	LD: Con swing	2015 majority	2015 turnout
24.2%	Portsmouth South	12.6%	Con gain	-23.6%	1.6%	12.6%	12.5%	58.5%
13.6%	Kingston & Surbiton	13.2%	Con gain	-15.3%	2.7%	9.0%	4.8%	72.9%
	Average for all Con seats won from the LDs (England)			-17.7%	4.2%	11.0%		70.4%

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39. The outcome in the two Lib Dem:Conservative marginal constituencies with a large proportion of students that HEPI predicted would change hands was clear. In both, there was a small increase in the Conservatives' vote share and a big drop in the Liberal Democrats' vote share. The swing from the Liberal Democrats to the Conservatives in the two seats (12.6 per cent and 9.0 per cent) was comparable with the average for all the seats the Conservatives gained from the Liberal Democrats (11.0 per cent) in England. So a large student effect seems unlikely, even though the Conservative

share of the vote grew less (1.6 per cent in Portsmouth South and 2.7 per cent in Kingston & Surbiton) than in England as a whole (4.2 per cent).

40. The fall in the Liberal Democrat vote was larger in Portsmouth South, which has a higher proportion of full-time students, than Kingston and Surbiton but this seems unlikely to explain the difference. In Portsmouth South, there was a new Liberal Democrat candidate and the same Conservative candidate as in 2010, while the former Liberal Democrat MP stood as an Independent. In Kingston & Surbiton, the Liberal Democrat candidate was a Cabinet Minister, the Rt Hon Ed Davey who – despite losing – may still have benefited from a small incumbency factor.

41. Portsmouth South was the only constituency in the top 20 by highest density of full-time students in Great Britain that was a Conservative gain.<sup>36</sup> The only other Conservative seat in the top 20 is Canterbury, which – despite Labour displacing the Liberal Democrats as the runner-up on a Conservative:Labour swing of 5.2 per cent – the Tories retained with a sizeable majority (18.3 per cent). Conservative dominance was bolstered by the University of Kent's academic year, as the 2010 and 2015 elections occurred in the spring vacation when many students were at home.

42. Before the election, the Liberal Democrats had five of the 20 seats with the highest proportion of full-time students across the whole of Great Britain. Afterwards, they held just one: Leeds North West, where Greg Mulholland hung on despite Labour overtaking the Conservatives for second place (on a swing of 9.9 per cent).<sup>37</sup>

## Lib Dem:Labour marginals

*Seats that were predicted to shift from Liberal Democrat to Labour*

% of adults who are full-time students	Seat	2010 majority	2015 result	Lib Dem	Lab	Lib Dem: Lab swing	2015 majority	2015 turnout
20.1%	Manchester Withington	4.2%	Lab gain	-20.7%	+13.3%	17.0%	29.8%	67.4%
17.8%	Norwich South	0.7%	Lab gain	-15.7%	+10.6%	13.2%	15.8%	64.7%
16.6%	Bermondsey & Old Southwark	19.1%	Lab gain	-14.0%	+13.8	13.9%	8.7%	61.7%
24.3%	Bristol West	20.5%	Lab gain	-29.2%	+8.1%	18.7%	8.8%	70.4%
27.5%	Cambridge	13.5% <sup>38</sup>	Lab gain	-4.3%	+11.7%	8.0%	1.2% <sup>39</sup>	62.1%
	Average for all Lab seats won from the Lib Dems (England)			-16.9%	+12.4%	14.7%		64.1%

43. The Liberal Democrats also did poorly in the seats with a high concentration of students where Labour had been a close runner-up in 2010. All four fell to Labour, as did Cambridge, where Labour had come third in 2010.<sup>40</sup>

44. There was a disparity of results in these five seats. Although the Liberal Democrat vote share declined in all of them, the drop ranged from 4.3 per cent in Cambridge to 29.2 per cent in Bristol West. In both seats, there was a one-term sitting Liberal Democrat MP, so

differential incumbency is not the explanation. However, the Green Party played a different role and this also made them different from the other three.

- Students wishing to register an anti-Conservative tactical vote may have been more attracted to the Liberal Democrats in Cambridge. Not only had Labour been third in 2010 but the big advance for the Green Party had come then, when they secured their third best result anywhere in the country (7.6 per cent), rather than in 2015, when their vote share only increased fractionally (to 7.9 per cent).
- In Bristol West, the Green Party did very well, winning over 17,000 votes and a 23.0 per cent increase in vote share (to 26.8 per cent) to take second place. This was the second best performance by the Green Party anywhere in the UK in 2015.<sup>41</sup>

45. The poor showing of the Liberal Democrats compared to Labour in areas with many students meant the Liberal Democrats fell from first to fourth in Norwich South.

46. The disparity in results for Lib Dem:Labour seats with a large proportion of students is comparable with the variability in results in other Lib Dem:Labour marginal seats won by Labour. The growth in Labour support ranged from 6.3 per cent (Burnley) to 20.9 per cent (Brent Central), with an average increase of 12.4 per cent, while the fall in Liberal Democrat support varied from 4.2 per cent (Bradford East) to 35.8 per cent (Brent Central), with an average fall of 16.9 per cent. This suggests the tendency of students to vote as a bloc is overstated.

47. In Brighton Pavilion, the Green Party scored its best performance in a UK seat, sextupling its majority of 1,252 to 7,967. It no longer looks like the three-way marginal that it was said to be at the previous general election of 2010.

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*Seat predicted to stay Green*

<b>Proportion of adults who are full-time students</b>	<b>Seat</b>	<b>2010 majority</b>	<b>2015 result</b>	<b>Green</b>	<b>2015 majority</b>	<b>2015 turnout</b>
20.8%	Brighton Pavilion	2.4%	Green hold	+10.5%	14.6%	71.4%
	Average for all England			+3.2%		65.9%

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## Chapter 3: Other observations

### The Liberal Democrats and the student vote

48. Despite some important regional differences (notably in Scotland), all the main political parties except one increased their share of the UK vote at the 2015 general election. The exception were the Liberal Democrats, who lost two-thirds of their support (from 23.0 per cent to 7.9 per cent) between 2010 and 2015. Given seven of the eight student-heavy seats that changed hands were Liberal Democrat losses, either to Labour (5) or the Conservatives (2), it is possible this might have been due to shifts in the electorate as a whole rather than differential voting patterns among students.

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#### *Change in vote share of the main political parties between 2010 and 2015*

Political party	Change in vote share, 2010-2015 (%)
Conservative	0.8
Green	2.8
Labour	1.5
Liberal Democrat	-15.2
SNP	3.1
UKIP	9.5

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49. Only three of the seven seats saw a drop in the Liberal Democrats' share of the vote that was substantially greater than the 15.2 per cent drop they faced across the UK as a whole. In Portsmouth South, the loss was 23.6 per cent. In Manchester Withington, it was 20.7 per cent. In Bristol West, it was 29.2 per cent. Two of these seats (Portsmouth

South and Bristol West) had contests that might have led to big swings against the Liberal Democrats irrespective of students' behaviour, as discussed above. Moreover, the above-average swing made no difference to the outcome in Portsmouth South or Manchester Withington, which would have changed hands even on a swing of 15.2 per cent.

50. It is possible that Liberal Democrat MPs who rebelled on the Coalition's decision to raise the full-time undergraduate tuition fee cap to £9,000 may have fared better than others. In total, 21 Liberal Democrat MPs opposed the £9,000 tuition fee cap in 2010 but only 11 of them represented an English seat and stood in 2015. Three kept their seats: Tim Farron; Greg Mulholland; and John Pugh.

51. It is difficult to find a big electoral benefit in having been a rebel. Some of them held the fall in vote share down but others did not. On average, they faced a fall in vote share of 13.4 per cent, slightly better than the average fall in England of 16.0 per cent (or the UK of 15.2 per cent). Of the rebels, Julian Huppert in Cambridge, who signed the NUS's pledge to oppose fees once before and once after the 2010 election, had the lowest fall (4.3 per cent) and John Leech in Manchester Withington had the highest (20.7 per cent).

52. The five Liberal Democrat MPs in England who abstained on raising the fee cap and stood for re-election in 2015 did worse than those who had voted against on average. None held their seat. The loss in votes ranged from 11.2 per cent in Wells to 29.2 per cent in Bristol West. They also did worse than their party overall, with an average fall in vote share of 17.6 per cent. Yet four of the five had lower falls than the average, which is skewed by the particularly poor result in Bristol West.

53. There were another 17 Liberal Democrat MPs for English seats who backed higher fees and stood in 2015. Their vote share fell on average by 14.6 per cent, which is marginally better than the overall



loss of Liberal Democrat votes and three of them (Tom Brake, Nick Clegg and Norman Lamb) retained their seats. The fall in vote share ranged from 4.2 per cent (Bradford East) to 22.6 per cent (Yeovil). So those who backed higher fees fared a little better than those who abstained but slightly worse than those who had voted against. (See Appendix 2.) The differences are slight compared to the incumbency factor for Liberal Democrats first elected in 2010, who saw an average fall in vote share that was limited to 9.8 per cent.<sup>42</sup>

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*Lib Dems standing for re-election in England*

	<b>Fall in vote (%)</b>
Fee rebels (11)	13.4
Fee abstainers (5)	17.6
Fee supporters (17)	14.6

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54. Altogether, the eight Liberal Democrat MPs who survived the 2015 cull included four who had voted against higher fees (three in England and one in Wales) and four who had voted for them (three in England and one in Scotland). The slim difference between the two groups in terms of the vote share seems surprising, especially given the NUS's 'Liar, Liar' campaign aimed at punishing those who had broken the trust of students.<sup>43</sup> Yet, given that most university courses are less than five years long, the majority of full-time students at the 2010 election were no longer students by the time of the 2015 election so may not have felt personally betrayed. There are arguably parallels with the 2005 election. Then, Labour MPs seeking re-election who had rebelled over the Higher Education Act (2004), which allowed for £3,000 fees, performed slightly better than those who

had not, but it had only a limited impact: 'Higher Education rebels performed better than the loyalists, but not by sufficient to counter-act the effect of a large student population.'<sup>44</sup>

## **Students and the opinion polls**

55. HEPI's seat predictions were informed by students' voting intentions according to a BES survey undertaken in early 2014. This was the best evidence at the time, but it was already some months old. The table below shows these results along with three other datasets:

- how students are thought to have voted in 2010 (also from the BES);
- the voting intention of students in a 2015 YouthSight pre-election poll; and
- YouthSight's 2015 'exit poll' (which is not a true exit poll).<sup>45</sup>

Because the 2014 BES data are for England only, the other BES data are for England and Wales and the YouthSight data are for the whole UK, the datasets are not directly comparable. Moreover, the exit poll had a 'prefer not to say' option, which the others did not.

56. Taken at face value, the Youthsight exit poll data show Labour performed better among students than was predicted just before the election. The proportion who said they had voted Conservative (19 per cent) was lower than either the BES (29 per cent) or the pre-election poll (26 per cent) had suggested would do so. Compared to the rest of the electorate, which backed the Conservatives more and Labour less than the polls suggested, this seems counter-intuitive. Any pro-Labour surge probably results from them picking up votes from the Green Party in late swings.

57. There may have been a 'shy Tory' effect too. Discussing the gap between opinion polls and the overall election result, Peter Kellner of YouGov has asked: 'Were there people who decided to vote Conservative,

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### *Voting behaviour of full-time students*

	<b>British Election Study 2010</b>	<b>British Election Study (England only)</b>	<b>YouthSight pre-election</b>	<b>YouthSight exit poll</b>
Labour	28	45	34	39
Conservative	23	29	26	19
Green	3	5	21	13
Liberal Democrat	44	13	7	7
UKIP	2	7	4	3
SNP	-	-	6	4
Other	2	1	-	-
Prefer not to say	-	-	-	13

NB These data sets are not directly comparable.

Sources: <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/VERY-FINAL-CLEAN-PDF.pdf>;

<http://www.youthsight.com/labour-remain-the-first-choice-party-for-students/>;

<http://www.youthsight.com/student-vote-series-labour-dominated-the-student-vote-ukip-and-lib-dems-soundly-rejected>

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while telling pollsters they would vote for a change of government? This seems to be the likeliest explanation.<sup>46</sup> The data on students support this. In the YouthSight exit poll, 13 per cent of full-time students said they would 'prefer not to say' how they had voted, while the 20 per cent gap between Labour on 39 per cent and the Conservatives on 19 per cent was much bigger than the 8 per cent gap in the final pre-election poll. YouthSight concluded: 'many of those [students] who wanted to keep their vote private, were actually voting Conservative – an interesting manifestation of the “shy Tory” effect.’<sup>46</sup>

58. These results are corroborated by a small post-election survey of new graduates by the NUS. This put Labour at 40 per cent, the Conservatives at 20 per cent, the Greens at 17 per cent and the Liberal Democrats at 9 per cent. Around one-in-ten (11 per cent) respondents preferred not to say, which led the NUS to support the shy-Tory hypothesis but also to pose the question of whether there is also a small group of shy Liberal Democrat voters.<sup>48</sup>

59. Detailed work on why the polls were wrong discounts the shy-Conservative thesis for Great Britain as a whole (as well as the likelihood of a swing towards the Conservatives in the final part of the election campaign and the proposition that 'don't knows' plumped for the Conservatives in larger numbers than for Labour). Two other theories are considered more likely: the sampling and weighting of poll results; and, especially, differential turnout, meaning the Conservatives benefited from 'shifts in party support amongst those who are actually less likely to turnout to vote, even if they say they will.'<sup>49</sup> This does not rule out a shy-Tory effect among students altogether because:

- it is an early rather than a final assessment;
- students may not act the same as the electorate as a whole; and
- the television stations' exit polling seemed to underestimate Conservative support (while still putting them ahead of other parties), which could suggest a shy-Tory trend.<sup>50</sup>

## Turnout

60. The HEPI paper included a discussion of the impact of Individual Electoral Registration (IER) on students. Whatever the benefits of it, a wealth of evidence and informed opinion indicated the shift could disproportionately affect students living away from home who were at risk of not making it on to the new registers. To take one example, the old household-based system enabled the managers of halls of residence to register students *en masse*, which is not possible once the legal responsibility rests with individuals.

61. The concerns about low registration rates expressed in HEPI's report were similar to those in a subsequent analysis by the BBC that showed a disproportionately big fall in the population registered to vote in cities with large numbers of students, as well as in other data publicised by the Labour Party and used by Ed Miliband in a high-profile speech in January 2015.<sup>51</sup> In response to such concerns, the Coalition Government defended the transitional arrangements from the old to the new registration systems and talked up a new online registration system, while also finding £10 million for boosting last-minute registration.<sup>52</sup>

62. There was a surge in registration in the run-up to polling day: 'The total number of electors in Great Britain on the May 2015 parliamentary registers was 45,336,013, which is over 1.2 million more entries than in December 2014 (+3%).'<sup>53</sup> Many students are thought to have been among those undertaking last-minute registrations.<sup>54</sup> This reflects the work of organisations such as the NUS, individual students' unions and Bite the Ballot, as well as the Electoral Commission and local Electoral Registration Officers, who have the legal responsibility for registering voters.<sup>55</sup> The NUS estimate that student unions collectively helped register 100,000 students across the UK.

63. Post-election polling by Ipsos MORI suggests only 43 per cent of people aged 18 to 24 bothered to vote but that they gave Labour a 16 per cent lead (with 43 per cent backing Labour and 27 per cent

supporting the Conservatives).<sup>56</sup> However, this is of modest use when assessing the electoral impact of students because many students are not so young. Moreover, election turnout is the number of votes cast as a percentage of the number of voters on the register so is not directly comparable with polls that make no such distinction.

64. In total, 46.4 million people were registered to vote in the UK at the 2015 election and 30.8 million votes were counted, meaning turnout across the UK was 66.4 per cent (slightly up on 2010 and including a low of 58.4 per cent in Northern Ireland and a high of 71.1 per cent in Scotland).<sup>57</sup> There is no reason to think students who were on the register were less likely to vote than others and some evidence to suggest the opposite.

65. According to YouthSight's so-called exit poll, turnout among students was higher than among the population as a whole:

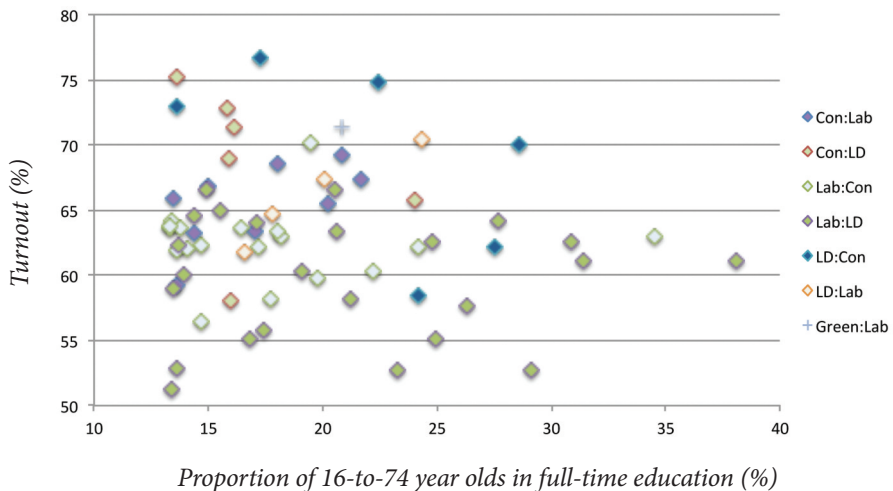
*YouthSight estimate that student voter turnout was 69% in the May 2015 general election; slightly higher than the national figure of 66% and considerably higher than the estimated turnout for the general youth population (58%). However, this number is lower than the 75% figure predicted by YouthSight in April 2015 – a figure we base on a standard 'likelihood to vote' question which respondents rate on a one to 10 scale.*<sup>58</sup>

It is plausible that those who went out of their way to register themselves in the run-up to the election were particularly motivated to turn out and vote.

66. The suggestion that students were even more likely to vote than other registered electors is corroborated by the smaller NUS online survey of students graduating in 2015: 'We found that a total of 74 per cent of post-2012 fee paying graduates voted in the General Election, considerably higher than turnout for the wider electorate.'<sup>59</sup> This research also found that students with black and minority ethnic backgrounds were somewhat less likely to vote.

67. In constituencies with large numbers of students, it is hard to discern a correlation between the proportion of full-time students and the turnout on election day (see chart and, for further details, Appendix 3).

*Turnout in areas where at least 13% of the 16-to-74 year old population are in full-time education*



68. However, a high turnout was a common feature of Lib Dem:Conservative battles. In all 26 seats that the Conservatives won from the Liberal Democrats in England, the turnout was 70.4 per cent on average. Seats with particularly high turnouts and a relatively high proportion of students include:

- Sheffield Hallam, where turnout was 76.7 per cent and which returned Nick Clegg to the House of Commons;
- Bath, where turnout was 74.8 per cent and where a new Liberal Democrat candidate lost to the Conservative Ben Howlett; and
- Kingston & Surbiton, where turnout was 72.9 per cent and where the Liberal Democrat Ed Davey lost to the Conservatives.<sup>60</sup>

One notable exception was Portsmouth South, which had the second lowest turnout (behind Birmingham Yardley) of any seat lost by the Liberal Democrats in the UK.

69. In Lib Dem:Labour marginal seats, turnout was generally lower, with an average turnout of 64.1 per cent in the seats Labour won. An exception was Bristol West, where the strong performance of the Green Party helped ensure the second highest turnout (after Hornsey & Wood Green) in all the seats won by Labour off the Liberal Democrats. In Cambridge, where Labour leapfrogged from third to first, turnout was closer to that in Lib Dem:Labour marginals than to the Lib Dem:Conservative marginal group to which it belonged. Despite the low turnout, students may have been decisive there. Ward-by-ward analysis shows the Liberal Democrats were 7.0 per cent ahead of Labour in the three student-heavy wards, but their lead in 2010 in the same Cambridge wards had been 27.4 per cent.<sup>61</sup>

70. YouthSight's 'exit poll' suggested more students who voted did so in their home constituency (60%) than their university constituency (40%), which may have diluted their impact by lessening the effect of bloc voting in university seats (though it could have had the opposite effect too by making some of their parents' constituencies more marginal).<sup>62</sup> It is likely that the tendency to vote at home was encouraged by the transition procedures for IER, which were better suited to family homes than for the temporary accommodation typically used by students.<sup>63</sup> When Ed Miliband raised the issue, the *Guardian* reported, 'Liberal Democrat sources pointed out Labour had supported the switch to individual registration, and even if there was a fall in first-year students registering in university towns, many could still vote in their constituency home.'<sup>64</sup>



## Conclusion

71. Two contrasting post-election analyses suggest student voters were less motivated by so-called student issues than is sometimes supposed.

YouthSight's analysis of the policy priorities of students concluded:

*we've consistently seen that students are most worried about personal issues, with job opportunities and living costs topping the list of concerns. ... What we see beyond the top two concerns is interesting as it suggests that students are tuned into current affairs, with concerns reflecting global events. ... students did not select home affairs issues in their top concerns. Neither health, policing, education nor housing featured in students' top concerns, suggesting that beyond their immediate needs (a job and enough money to survive), students have a global outlook when it comes to politics.<sup>65</sup>*

The NUS post-election poll of recent graduates found:

*broadly speaking, the most salient issues corresponded to those of the wider electorate, with the major exception of immigration. While graduates followed the general trend of emphasising the importance of common valence issues such as the NHS, the economy and public finances, they tended not to see immigration as a major issue ... While education and tuition fees may have been a more prominent issue for the graduates compared to the wider electorate, they were certainly not anywhere near the most salient issues for them at the general election.<sup>66</sup>*

72. One reason why student issues may be of lesser importance is that most students are not at university for very long. Undergraduate courses in England typically last around three years and postgraduate courses often last only one year. So the student experience is a transient one and the student body differs from one general election to the next. Indeed, if the EU referendum does not occur until the 2017/18 academic year, then around two-thirds of undergraduates will be different people to those at the general election just 18 months before.

Another reason why students may not vote on student issues is that promises to improve student finance, say, are often of more financial benefit to future as opposed to current students.

73. For students to have an electoral impact, they must:

- be registered to vote; and
- turn out to vote; and
- be present in significant numbers; and
- live in a marginal constituency; and
- vote differently to the rest of the local electorate.

74. It seems likely that, at the 2015 election, students registered to vote in larger numbers than feared and a relatively high proportion of them turned out. But many voted at home rather than at their place of study, which altered their influence (and made it more difficult to assess). They may have voted somewhat less differently to the rest of the electorate than was expected perhaps due, in part, to a shy-Conservative effect. In some seats where students were expected to make a difference, their impact was swamped by wider electoral trends that led to the first newly-elected majority Conservative Government since 1992.

75. Although students did not have the precise electoral impact expected of them in 2015, they were still important. For example, given that all the available evidence suggests students are more likely to support Labour and less likely to support the Conservatives than the electorate as a whole, they are likely to have been decisive in places not discussed in the original HEPI report. Labour narrowly won some seats off the Conservatives where more than 10 per cent of the population aged 16 to 74 is a full-time student, including:

- i. the City of Chester, with a majority of 93 (0.2 per cent);
- ii. Ealing Central and Acton, with a majority of 274 (0.5 per cent);
- iii. Brentford and Isleworth, with a majority of 465 (0.8 per cent).
- iv. Ilford North, with a majority of 589 (1.2 per cent); and
- v. Wolverhampton South West, with a majority of 801 (2.0 per cent).<sup>67</sup>

76. Given Labour's progress in England in 2015 amounted to winning 15 more seats than in 2010, much of it can be ascribed to students. If just 47 Labour voters in Chester had voted Conservative instead or 94 more Conservatives had turned out to vote or some of those voting for one of the candidates not in the top two had chosen differently, the seat would not have changed hands. However, such slight majorities can be ascribed to other factors too, such as a particularly active local campaign. As Philip Cowley has written in another context, 'In a vote this tight, almost anything that makes a difference can convincingly be said to be crucial.'<sup>68</sup>

77. It is arguably surprising that the Conservatives (and perhaps the Liberal Democrats given their recent travails) should have legislated in the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act (2011) for the default timing of future general elections to be in regular university term-times, on the first Thursday in May every five years. This could amplify the modest electoral impact of students, despite the recent tendency for many of them to vote at home. On the other hand, it could stack up left-of-centre votes in constituencies that are unlikely to go blue.

78. The new electoral registration system did not have as much negative impact on students' propensity to vote as had been feared, but it continues to pose a challenge. For example, it remains harder than it used to be for university authorities to ensure that their students are registered to vote: a one-off change has left a permanent headache. There could be a particular challenge in registering those students who are unlikely to witness a general election during their course – although the cohorts of students starting in autumn 2015 and 2016 could be motivated to register in order to vote in the EU referendum. While the process of online registration is straightforward, last-minute registration poses an overlooked challenge for candidates and campaign teams wishing to engage student voters.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> British Polling Council, 'General Election: 7 May 2015', Press release, 8 May 2015 (<http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/general-election-7-may-2015/>)
- <sup>2</sup> 'The 1992 election in Britain will long be remembered, like the 1948 presidential election in America, for the opinion polls' disastrous error in predicting the results. . . . In Britain, forty-four years later, a final poll of polls, based on the four polls actually published on polling day, suggested a 0.9 percent Labour lead; the Conservatives actually won by 7.6 per cent – an 8.5 percent error, the largest ever.' (David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1992*, 1992, p.135) 'The reason why the pollsters were seen to be so wrong was that the often overwritten stories based on their figures confidently forecast a Conservative victory – and the Conservatives lost.', David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of February 1974*, 1974, p.262
- <sup>3</sup> 'Since then [1992], all pollsters have spruced up the way they match their samples to the general population.' Peter Kellner, 'We got it wrong. Why?', 11 May 2015 (<https://yougov.co.uk/news/2015/05/11/we-got-it-wrong-why/>)
- <sup>4</sup> The analysis here is based on the eight final polls that the British Polling Council has focused on rather than every poll from every source – see British Polling Council, 'General Election: 7 May 2015', Press release, 8 May 2015 (<http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/general-election-7-may-2015/>)
- <sup>5</sup> British Polling Council, 'General Election: 7 May 2015', Press release, 8 May 2015 (<http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/general-election-7-may-2015/>)
- <sup>6</sup> British Polling Council, 'General Election: 7 May 2015', Press release, 8 May 2015 (<http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/general-election-7-may-2015/>)
- <sup>7</sup> Peter Kellner, 'We got it wrong. Why?', 11 May 2015 (<https://yougov.co.uk/news/2015/05/11/we-got-it-wrong-why/>)
- <sup>8</sup> Includes rounding
- <sup>9</sup> 'Election 2015: UK results', BBC News online, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2015/results>
- <sup>10</sup> House of Commons Library, *General Election 2015*, Briefing Paper CBP7186, 28 July 2015, p.14 (<http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7186/CBP-7186.pdf>)
- <sup>11</sup> 'Can any party win a majority?', may2015.com, <http://www.may2015.com/category/seat-calculator/>
- <sup>12</sup> Dame Julia Goodfellow, 'Dame Julia Goodfellow speaking at Universities for Europe launch', Universities UK press release, 27 July 2015
- <sup>13</sup> National Union of Students (NUS), 'Students could swing almost 200 seats at the General Election', press release, 6 October 2014 (<http://www.nus.org.uk/en/news/students-could-swing-almost-200-seats-says-nus-as-it-launches-new-deal-general-election-manifesto/>)
- <sup>14</sup> See the evidence referred to in Stephen D. Fisher and Nick Hillman, *Do students swing elections? Registration, turnout and voting among full-time students*, HEPI Report 70, December 2014, p.39 (<http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Do-students-swing-elections.pdf>); NUS, 'Students could swing almost 200 seats at the General Election', NUS News, 6 October 2014

- (<http://www.nus.org.uk/en/news/students-could-swing-almost-200-seats-says-nus-as-it-launches-new-deal-general-election-manifesto/>)
- <sup>15</sup> HEPI, 'Students could tip the balance of power at the 2015 election – so long as they register to vote', Press release, 1 December 2014 (<http://www.hepi.ac.uk/2014/12/01/hepi-students-tip-balance-power-2015-election-long-register-vote/>)
- <sup>16</sup> Stephen D. Fisher and Nick Hillman, *Do students swing elections? Registration, turnout and voting among full-time students*, HEPI Report 70, December 2014 (<http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Do-students-swing-elections.pdf>)
- <sup>17</sup> *The Times Guide to the House of Commons 2015*, Times Books, 2015, p.31
- <sup>18</sup> YouthSight, 'Student Vote – Labour remain the first choice party for students', Press release, 7 May 2015 (<http://www.youthsight.com/labour-remain-the-first-choice-party-for-students/>)
- <sup>19</sup> Stephen D. Fisher and Nick Hillman, *Do students swing elections? Registration, turnout and voting among full-time students*, HEPI Report 70, December 2014, p.22 (<http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Do-students-swing-elections.pdf>)
- <sup>20</sup> In 1992, the general election happened during a university vacation, which is thought to have reduced turnout in some seats, such as Cambridge, Oxford East, Sheffield Hallam, the City of Durham and, in Wales, Cardiff Central. (David Butler and Dennis Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 1992*, 1992, p.347)
- <sup>21</sup> Nicholas Hillman, 'From Grants for All to Loans for All: Undergraduate Finance from the Implementation of the Anderson Report (1962) to the Implementation of the Browne Report (2012)', *Contemporary British History*, vol. 27, no. 3, p.264 ([http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13619462.2013.783418#.VdQ\\_PGBN2FI](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13619462.2013.783418#.VdQ_PGBN2FI))
- <sup>22</sup> For a longer version of this argument, see Nick Hillman, 'Today's students aren't an electoral force, but wait until debts bite', *Guardian*, 15 July 2014 (<http://www.theguardian.com/education/2014/jul/15/today-students-not-electoral-force-wait-debts-bite>)
- <sup>23</sup> See, for example, 'Key slams interest-free student loans, but won't drop them', 3 News, 13 March 2012 (<http://www.3news.co.nz/politics/key-slams-interestfree-student-loans-but-wont-drop-them-2012031311#ixzz3kxLHY9hr>)
- <sup>24</sup> Andy Burnham, Recapturing the spirit of '45', 28 July 2015 (<https://medium.com/@Andy4Leader/recapturing-the-ebd0d43f4ee2>)
- <sup>25</sup> 'What is Yvette Cooper's programme for government?', BBC News online, 13 August 2015 (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-33859518>)
- <sup>26</sup> George Eaton, 'Five things we learned from Liz Kendall at the Press Gallery', *New Statesman* (<http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2015/05/five-things-we-learned-liz-kendall-press-gallery>)
- <sup>27</sup> HM Treasury, *Summer Budget 2015*, July 2015, p.59 ([https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/443232/50325\\_Summer\\_Budget\\_15\\_Web\\_Accessible.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/443232/50325_Summer_Budget_15_Web_Accessible.pdf))
- <sup>28</sup> Stephen D. Fisher and Nick Hillman, *Do students swing elections? Registration, turnout and voting among full-time students*, HEPI Report 70, December 2014, p.1 (<http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Do-students-swing-elections.pdf>)

- <sup>29</sup> Stephen D. Fisher and Nick Hillman, *Do students swing elections? Registration, turnout and voting among full-time students*, HEPI Report 70, December 2014, pp.37-38 (<http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Do-students-swing-elections.pdf>)
- <sup>30</sup> Stephen D. Fisher and Nick Hillman, *Do students swing elections? Registration, turnout and voting among full-time students*, HEPI Report 70, December 2014, p.47 (footnote 47), p.38 (<http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Do-students-swing-elections.pdf>)
- <sup>31</sup> The UKIP seat, Clacton, had already been lost to UKIP at a by-election prior to the general election after the Conservative MP Douglas Carswell changed parties and successfully stood for re-election under a new colour.
- <sup>32</sup> Constituencies were considered where the 2011 Census had shown the proportion of full-time students among the population aged between 16 and 74 amounted to more than 13 per cent.
- <sup>33</sup> The tables and surrounding text have been compiled using a number of sources, including Ian Brunskill, *The Times Guide to the House of Commons 2015*, 2015, and British Election Study, *General Election Results File*, 7 August 2015 (<http://www.britishelectionstudy.com/custom/uploads/2015/05/BES-2015-General-Election-results-file-v1.1.xlsx>). The turnout data are the Electoral Commission's verified results, which are different to earlier figures available elsewhere.
- <sup>34</sup> Ian Jones, 'Hendon: Labour's easiest gain', 11 July 2015, (<http://ukgeneralelection.com/2014/07/11/hendon-labours-easiest-gain/>)
- <sup>35</sup> House of Commons Library, *General Election 2015*, Briefing Paper CBP7186, 28 July 2015, p.43 (<http://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7186/CBP-7186.pdf>)
- <sup>36</sup> Tim Carr, Iain Dale and Robert Waller (eds), *The Politicos Guide to the New House of Commons 2015*, 2015, p.106
- <sup>37</sup> Tim Carr, Iain Dale and Robert Waller (eds), *The Politicos Guide to the New House of Commons 2015*, 2015, p.106
- <sup>38</sup> This figure is the swing that the Conservatives, who came second in Cambridge in 2010, would have needed in order to defeat the incumbent Liberal Democrats.
- <sup>39</sup> In Cambridge, Labour overtook both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats so the figure for the 2015 majority is not directly comparable with the one for 2010.
- <sup>40</sup> The author was the Conservative Party candidate in Cambridge in 2010. HEPI is a registered charity and independent of all political parties.
- <sup>41</sup> Despite the relatively low fall in the Liberal Democrat share of the vote, this was the only seat in England where the party that was third in 2010 managed to win in 2015.
- <sup>42</sup> Tim Smith, 'Lib Dem incumbency advantage persists but fails to prevent disaster', Ballots & Bullets blog, 19 May 2015 (<http://nottspolitics.org/2015/05/19/general-election-2015-results-lib-dem-incumbency-advantage-persists-but-fails-to-prevent-disaster/>)
- <sup>43</sup> NUS, 'Sign up to our Liar Liar campaign' (<http://www.nus.org.uk/en/liar-liar/>)
- <sup>44</sup> Philip Cowley and Mark Stuart, 'Being Policed? Or Just Pleasing Themselves?: Electoral Rewards and Punishment for Legislative Behaviour in an Era of Localized Campaigning Effects: The Case of the UK in 2005', February 2011, p.11 (<https://www.essex.ac.uk/bes/EP0P%202005/Papers/EP0P%20paper.pdf>). Quoted with permission.

- <sup>45</sup> YouthSight's 'exit poll' is not a true exit poll as it was undertaken a week after the election rather than as people left polling stations, was conducted online rather than in person and included some people who had not voted rather than only those who had – indeed, it included some people who were not even registered to vote.
- <sup>46</sup> Peter Kellner, 'We got it wrong. Why?', 11 May 2015 (<https://yougov.co.uk/news/2015/05/11/we-got-it-wrong-why/>)
- <sup>47</sup> YouthSight, 'Student Vote – Labour dominates. UKIP & Lib Dems rejected', Press release, 24 June 2015 (<http://www.youthsight.com/student-vote-series-labour-dominated-the-student-vote-ukip-and-lib-dems-soundly-rejected/>)
- <sup>48</sup> NUS, *Debt in the first degree: Attitudes and behaviours of the first £9k fee paying graduates*, August 2015, p.13 (<http://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/nusdigital/document/documents/16867/0212d732f9742d75af05907fe70f27dc/Debt%20In%20The%20First%20Degree%20-%20Graduates%20Survey%202015%20Report.pdf>)
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- <sup>59</sup> NUS, *Debt in the first degree*, August 2015, p.13 (<http://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/nusdigital/document/>)

documents/16867/0212d732f9742d75af05907fe70f27dc/Debt%20In%20The%20First%20Degree%20-%20Graduates%20Survey%202015%20Report.pdf)

<sup>60</sup> The Conservatives came first and the Liberal Democrats second in both 2010 and 2015 in another seat with a relatively high turnout, Romsey and Southampton North (72.8 per cent). This suggests that a potential change of hands was not necessary to ensure a relatively high turnout in such seats.

<sup>61</sup> Phil Rodgers, 'How the wards were won', 25 May 2015  
(<https://philrodgers.wordpress.com/2015/05/25/how-the-wards-were-won/>)

<sup>62</sup> YouthSight, 'Student Vote – Labour dominates. UKIP & Lib Dems rejected', Press release, 24 June 2015  
(<http://www.youthsight.com/student-vote-series-labour-dominated-the-student-vote-ukip-and-lib-dems-soundly-rejected/>)

<sup>63</sup> Students can be registered at home and at their place of study but may only vote at one place in a general election.

<sup>64</sup> Patrick Wintour, '1m voters lost from electoral roll, says Ed Miliband', *Guardian*, 16 January 2015  
(<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/jan/16/ed-miliband-1m-voters-fallen-off-electoral-roll>)

<sup>65</sup> YouthSight, 'Student Vote – Labour dominates. UKIP & Lib Dems rejected', Press release, 24 June 2015  
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<sup>66</sup> NUS, *Debt in the first degree: Attitudes and behaviours of the first £9k fee paying graduates*, August 2015, p.14  
(<http://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/nusdigital/document/documents/16867/0212d732f9742d75af05907fe70f27dc/Debt%20In%20The%20First%20Degree%20-%20Graduates%20Survey%202015%20Report.pdf>)

<sup>67</sup> British Election Study, *General Election Results File*, 7 August 2015

<sup>68</sup> Philip Cowley, *The Rebels: How Blair mislaid his majority*, 2005, p.194



## Appendix 1: The eight final opinion polls

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	Conservative	Labour	Lib Dem	UKIP	Green	Other
Opinium	35%	34%	8%	12%	6%	5%
Survation	31%	31%	10%	16%	5%	7%
Ipsos MORI	36%	35%	8%	11%	5%	5%
ICM	34%	35%	9%	11%	4%	7%
ComRes	35%	34%	9%	12%	4%	6%
Populus	33%	33%	10%	14%	5%	6%
YouGov	34%	34%	10%	12%	4%	6%
Panelbase	31%	33%	8%	16%	5%	7%

Source: British Polling Council, 'General Election: 7 May 2015', Press release, 8 May 2015 (<http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/general-election-7-may-2015/>)

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## **Appendix 2: Liberal Democrat MPs in England and tuition fees**

### ***Liberal Democrat MPs who voted against higher tuition fees in 2010 and stood for re-election in 2015***

#### **Tim Farron (Westmorland & Lonsdale): -8.5%**

Andrew George (St Ives): -9.6%

Julian Huppert (Cambridge): -4.3%

John Leech (Manchester Withington): -20.7%

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne): -9.1%

#### **Greg Mulholland (Leeds North West): -10.7%**

#### **John Pugh (Southport): -18.7%**

Dan Rogerson (Cornwall North): -16.8%

Bob Russell (Colchester): -20.5%

Adrian Sanders (Torbay): -13.2%

Simon Wright (Norwich South): -15.7%

### ***Liberal Democrat MPs who abstained on higher tuition fees in 2010 and stood for re-election in 2015***

Lorely Burt (Solihull): -17.2%

Simon Hughes (Bermondsey & Old Southwark): -14.0%

Tessa Munt (Wells): -11.2%

Stephen Williams (Bristol West): -29.2%

Martin Horwood, who was abroad at a summit in Mexico (Cheltenham): -16.5%

*Liberal Democrat MPs who voted for higher tuition fees in 2010 and stood for re-election in 2015*

Norman Baker (Lewes): -16.1%

Gordon Birtwistle (Burnley): -6.2%

**Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): -13.4%**

Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): -12.0%

Vince Cable (Twickenham): -16.4%

**Nick Clegg (Sheffield Hallam): -13.4%**

Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): -15.3%

Lynne Featherstone (Hornsey & Wood Green): -14.7

Steve Gilbert (St Austell and Newquay): 18.8%

Duncan Hames (Chippenham): -16.4

Nick Harvey (North Devon): -17.9%

John Hemming (Birmingham Yardley): -14.0%

Mark Hunter (teller) (Cheadle): -16.1%

**Norman Lamb (North Norfolk): -16.4%**

David Laws (Yeovil): -22.6%

David Ward (Bradford East): -4.2%

Steve Webb (Thornbury and Yate): -14.0%

**Bold text** denotes MPs who were re-elected in 2015.

### Appendix 3: Turnout in seats with 13 per cent or more students

	1st party: 2nd party in 2010	Full-time students among 16-74 year olds	Total turnout
Hendon	Con:Lab	13.5	65.9
Lancaster & Fleetwood	Con:Lab	21.7	67.4
Lincoln	Con:Lab	14.4	63.2
Plymouth Sutton & Devonport	Con:Lab	20.2	65.5
Brighton Kemptown	Con:Lab	15.0	66.8
Loughborough	Con:Lab	20.8	69.2
Uxbridge & South Ruislip	Con:Lab	17.0	63.4
Cities Of London & Westminster	Con:Lab	13.6	59.3
Welwyn Hatfield	Con:Lab	18.0	68.5
Oxford West & Abingdon	Con:Lib Dem	13.6	75.2
Romsey & Southampton North	Con:Lib Dem	15.8	72.8
Canterbury	Con:Lib Dem	24.0	65.7
Bournemouth West	Con:Lib Dem	16.0	58.0
Guildford	Con:Lib Dem	16.1	71.3
Reading East	Con:Lib Dem	15.9	69.0
Southampton Itchen	Lab:Con	13.6	61.9
Derby North	Lab:Con	13.4	64.1
Birmingham Edgbaston	Lab:Con	18.2	63.0
Newcastle Under Lyme	Lab:Con	13.3	63.6
Nottingham South	Lab:Con	34.5	63.0
Exeter	Lab:Con	19.5	70.2
Southampton Test	Lab:Con	17.2	62.1

Luton South	Lab:Con	14.7	62.3
Birmingham Selly Oak	Lab:Con	22.2	60.3
Coventry South	Lab:Con	24.2	62.1
Huddersfield	Lab:Con	14.1	62.0
York Central	Lab:Con	18.0	63.3
Bradford West	Lab:Con	16.4	63.6
Brent North	Lab:Con	13.8	63.6
Ilford South	Lab:Con	14.7	56.4
Greenwich & Woolwich	Lab:Con	13.3	63.7
West Ham	Lab:Con	17.7	58.2
East Ham	Lab:Con	19.8	59.8
Sheffield Central	Lab:Lib Dem	38.1	61.1
Hull North	Lab:Lib Dem	16.8	55.1
Durham, City Of	Lab:Lib Dem	20.5	66.5
Islington South & Finsbury	Lab:Lib Dem	15.5	65.0
Oxford East	Lab:Lib Dem	27.7	64.2
Newcastle Upon Tyne East	Lab:Lib Dem	31.4	61.1
Stoke On Trent Central	Lab:Lib Dem	13.4	51.3
Manchester Gorton	Lab:Lib Dem	26.3	57.6
Holborn & St. Pancras	Lab:Lib Dem	20.6	63.3
Leicester South	Lab:Lib Dem	24.8	62.5
Liverpool Wavertree	Lab:Lib Dem	14.9	66.6
Nottingham East	Lab:Lib Dem	21.2	58.2
Newcastle Upon Tyne Central	Lab:Lib Dem	19.1	60.3
Bethnal Green & Bow	Lab:Lib Dem	17.1	64.0
Preston	Lab:Lib Dem	17.4	55.8

Middlesbrough	Lab:Lib Dem	13.6	52.9
Manchester Central	Lab:Lib Dem	29.1	52.7
Birmingham Ladywood	Lab:Lib Dem	23.3	52.7
Birmingham Perry Barr	Lab:Lib Dem	13.5	59.0
Leeds Central	Lab:Lib Dem	24.9	55.1
Lewisham Deptford	Lab:Lib Dem	14.4	64.6
Liverpool Riverside	Lab:Lib Dem	30.9	62.5
Camberwell & Peckham	Lab:Lib Dem	13.7	62.3
Tottenham	Lab:Lib Dem	13.9	60.1
Portsmouth South	Lib Dem:Con	24.2	58.5
Kingston & Surbiton	Lib Dem:Con	13.6	72.9
Cambridge	Lib Dem:Con	27.5	62.1
Leeds North West	Lib Dem:Con	28.6	70.0
Bath	Lib Dem:Con	22.4	74.8
Sheffield Hallam	Lib Dem:Con	17.3	76.7
Norwich South	Lib Dem:Lab	17.8	64.7
Manchester Withington	Lib Dem:Lab	20.1	67.4
Bermondsey & Old Southwark	Lib Dem:Lab	16.6	61.7
Bristol West	Lib Dem:Lab	24.3	70.4
Brighton Pavilion	Green:Lab	20.8	71.4

The order of constituencies in the table is from Stephen D. Fisher and Nick Hillman, *Do students swing elections? Registration, turnout and voting among full-time students?* (HEPI Report 70, December 2014) and links to the size of the majority at the 2010 election.

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Before the 2015 election, it was believed students would play an important part in the result. They were the target of Labour's commitment to reduce fees, and the NUS's 'Liar Liar' campaign was aimed at politicians who had broken promises made at the previous election. Meanwhile, a new electoral registration system put an extra hurdle in the way of students wanting to vote.

This new assessment looks at what happened on election day. In seats where students were predicted (by HEPI, among others) to swing the result, they had less impact than predicted. This is because the pre-election polls were wrong. However, in a small number of other seats where Labour displaced the Conservatives with slim majorities, it is likely that students did make a difference.

The story of what happened should help inform discussions on the role students could play in the referendum on the UK's place in the EU.

HEPI was established in 2002 to influence the higher education debate with evidence.

We are UK-wide, independent and non-partisan.

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