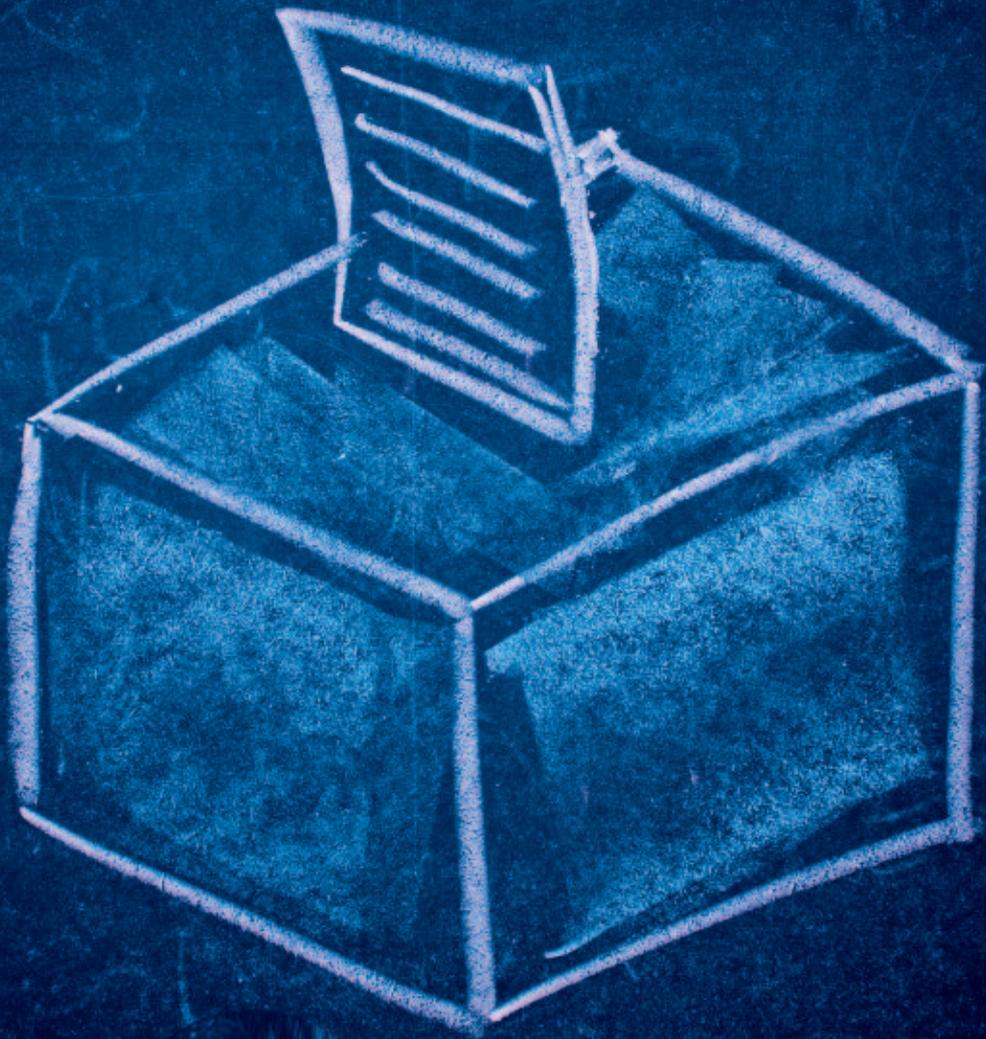


Do students swing elections? Registration, turnout and voting behaviour among full-time students

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Introduction

1. Britain has had a system of electoral registration that puts the legal responsibility for registering voters on householders but a new system of Individual Electoral Registration (IER) is being introduced. The change is designed to reduce electoral fraud and has widespread support. However, it poses particular challenges for certain groups, such as students.

2. Beyond the impact of the change to voter registration, it is unclear how significant an electoral force students are. 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.

3. At a national level, students' electoral impact appears to have been limited in recent times. Changes in undergraduate support from non-repayable grants to repayable loans, which might have motivated students to vote in certain ways, do not appear to have had a decisive impact on overall results. For example, in 2004 Labour legislated to triple the maximum tuition fee from 2006 but went on to win the 2005 general election.

4. However, the 2015 general election could be close, which means students could potentially determine the complexion of the subsequent government. The survey work that follows suggests students are not as powerful an electoral force as is sometimes supposed, but they could swing the result in just over 10 constituencies – principally to the advantage of the Labour Party. In a close fight, that could be enough to hold the keys to power.

5. The analysis also suggests many student voters are motivated by policies that directly affect students, such as the cost of study. In one respect, this is unsurprising: many electors vote for their own personal interests. But policies aimed at appealing to students typically offer less help to existing students, as opposed to future students. Even the infamous 2010 Liberal Democrat pledge to abolish tuition fees involved phasing them out over six years (albeit with immediate abolition for final-year students).¹

6. At some point, there may be a general election outside of university term time, which could dilute the power of student voters as they would be more dispersed. But, failing some unforeseen breakdown in the Coalition, that will not be the case at the next election. The Fixed-term Parliaments Act (2011) means that an election is already set for 7 May 2015, which is during the summer term at most universities.² Moreover, subsequent general elections will be scheduled for the first Thursday in May every five years, so long as a government can be formed that maintains the confidence of Members of Parliament or the House of Commons does not vote with a two-thirds majority for an early election.

Registration and turnout

7. Full-time university students are an important group of voters. They are numerous, disproportionately young and middle class and relatively homogenous. Politically, they are concentrated into a subset of parliamentary constituencies in term time, so can potentially influence who wins there.

8. The National Union of Students (NUS) recently claimed 'Students could swing almost 200 seats at the General Election.'³ But students are often young and live in relatively short-term rented accommodation, typically with only loose links to the communities in which they reside. As a result, they are sometimes absent from the electoral roll. If registered, they are less likely to turn out to vote. This reduces their political power as a group and their voices are in danger of being under-represented in the political process.

9. This paper looks specifically at the position of full-time university students in the electoral process, discussing in turn the issues of registration, turnout and voting.⁴ There are three general reasons why it is worth studying the electoral position of students.

- There are particular issues with electoral registration and participation that might lead to the under-representation of students at elections.
- Students, as a group, have distinct interests and policy preferences, especially regarding higher-education policy and tuition fees in particular.
- Partly arising from Britain's first-past-the-post electoral system,

students have significant potential voting power, which has implications for the results of the next general election.

10. Until 1970, the minimum voting age was 21, so younger people could not vote. However, the Representation of the People Act (1969) reduced the minimum voting age to 18. Case law quickly gave undergraduate students the vote at their term-time address as well as at their home address.⁵ Since students obtained the vote where they study, there has been a huge growth in the number of people in higher education and thus the number of potential student voters: the number of full-time undergraduates studying in the UK has risen from around 0.4 million in 1970 to around 1.4 million today. There are also 0.4 million full-time postgraduates.⁶

Registration

11. The electoral impact of students, as with other voters, is limited by incomplete registration. A study by the Electoral Commission published in March 2010 found 'University towns/districts with large student populations', such as Cambridge, Canterbury, Ceredigion, Colchester, Nottingham and Warwick, were among the areas where the electoral registers were in the worst state.⁷ At the 2010 general election, the National Union of Students (NUS) warned that 22 per cent of students might not be able to vote because they were not registered.⁸

12. Qualitative research undertaken for the Cabinet Office in 2012 confirmed the problem:

Most students across the research were unaware that they could register at their university address and their home address. Anecdotal evidence has previously suggested that in some cases students in student halls have been 'block registered' by an individual in charge of the halls. However, none of the students included in this research mentioned being registered automatically by their university; those who were registered tended to have been registered at home by their parents.⁹

13. In the run-up to the 2015 general election, Britain is changing the system of electoral registration. It is moving away from a system of household registration, where it is the legal obligation of householders to register people who are eligible to vote and only one person has to complete the form for all the people in a property to a system of Individual Electoral Registration, where it is the legal obligation of each individual to register. Failure to do so can incur an £80 penalty.

14. Household registration is considered particularly susceptible to fraud because large numbers of people living in the same accommodation can be registered together. However, the ability to register many people in one go can be a positive advantage for people living in communal accommodation, such as a hall of residence. Individual voter registration puts the onus on each individual to register directly with the authorities and to provide their National Insurance Number and date of birth as personal identifiers. The new system includes a national online registration system, www.gov.uk/register-to-vote, which is designed to help people who change address.

15. There are good reasons for shifting from the old household registration system to the new individual one. The principles behind the change are supported by all the main political parties. The process began under a Labour Government and has been continued under the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition. However, the Labour Party have made their support conditional on ensuring high registration rates, while also proposing to allow people to register on election day itself.¹⁰

Timeline of Individual Electoral Registration (IER) in Great Britain¹¹

- 2003** The Electoral Commission first called for IER
 - 2004** The Labour Government expressed sympathy for IER
 - 2009** The Political Parties and Elections Act made provision for IER
 - 2010** The Coalition decided to speed up the introduction of IER
 - 2011** A white paper on IER appeared
 - 2013** Electoral Registration and Administration Bill received Royal Assent
 - 2014** England, Scotland and Wales move to IER
 - 2015** The new IER information will be used in a general election
-

16. In 2011, the NUS called on the Government to delay individual voter registration 'until a strategy for ensuring that student registration will not be damaged has been developed.'¹² Those advising the Government on the change have also expressed particular concerns about the impact of the shift on students. For example, the Association of Electoral Administrators said in November 2013, 'we remain concerned about the practical difficulties there will be across the country in registering students, as well as residents of Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs).'¹³

17. The Government responded to such concerns by delivering more money to areas with substantial student populations and funding targeted initiatives on voter registration by third-party organisations.¹⁴ For example, when challenged on this specific issue, Greg Clark (previously a Minister for Cities and the Constitution with responsibility for voter registration and the Minister for Universities, Science and Cities since July 2014) told the House of Commons: '£47,000 has been allocated to Sheffield city council specifically to drive up electoral registration.'¹⁵

18. Transitional protections limit the number of people falling off the register. Councils have undertaken a data-matching exercise based on the old household register, mainly using data from the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) but also local data (such as Council Tax records).¹⁶ Where details matched, each voter was sent a letter notifying them that they had been moved to the new system and telling them not to

take any action unless their details were incorrect. In October 2014, the Government said the data for 87 per cent of voters in England and Wales, over 36 million people, had been successfully matched and automatically added to the electoral register.¹⁷

19. The transition has worked successfully for many people but 13 per cent of electors have not been transferred. The system is not well aligned with young people about to become legally entitled to vote (known as 'attainers'), nor has it coped well with students, particularly those who move away from their home area to study. This is because:

- many students will not typically appear on the DWP database and so need to re-register – University Ward in Lancaster, which is made up almost exclusively of students, had a matching rate of just 0.1 per cent;¹⁸
- many students move accommodation from year to year, which means Electoral Registration Officers (who have a statutory duty to compile a complete and accurate register) face difficulties tracing them to encourage re-registration – it is estimated to cost between £5 and £10 to trace each student to find out if they wish to be on the electoral roll at their place of study;¹⁹ and
- each year, a high proportion of students are new to an area and so will not have been on the old register in their place of study and cannot be automatically transferred.

20. The changes not only affect students' term-time addresses but also their vacation addresses, as the shift to individual

registration will remove the legal obligation on students' parents and carers to register them.²⁰

21. While there is no evidence that the problems associated with the old system were concentrated among students, they are being disproportionately affected by the new system, just as they were when Northern Ireland moved to individual voter registration in 2002.²¹ The official review of the transfer in England and Wales from household to individual registration, which was published in October 2014, concluded:

We know from previous pilots, including Confirmation Dry Run, that some groups are less likely to confirm – students, people living in privately rented accommodation, people living in communal establishments and recent home movers (there are clearly some overlaps between these groups). In addition, we know that some address types are more difficult to match due to their more complicated formatting e.g. rooms in student halls of residence. These findings were replicated in DWP confirmation this year with 16 of the 20 areas with the lowest match rates being Major Urban areas, 1 being a Large Urban area and 2 being Other Urban areas. 15 of the Major Urban areas were also London boroughs where there is a high churn, lots of flats and sub-divided properties and a high proportion of privately rented flats. A further 3 of the areas are likely to have high proportions of students (Oxford, Manchester and Cambridge).²²

22. Although the transitional protections have ensured a high transfer rate to the new system overall, the particular

challenges of registering students are likely to continue. Indeed, the risk that students will be unregistered could grow in future because transition activities are temporary while the challenge of dealing with highly-mobile individuals is permanent. Moreover, as the Chief Executive of Manchester City Council has noted, 'There is no clear national view on student registration under IER and it has been left to individual EROs [Electoral Registration Officers] to devise an approach in accordance with local circumstances.'²³

23. The challenges posed by the new system go beyond the issue of registering highly-mobile groups, and could even affect other electoral services. An academic survey of election staff on the challenges that were likely to be posed by the shift to individual registration concluded that it:

is a more resource-intensive method of compiling the electoral register; will pose new issues with data and technology for election officials; and, is likely to have a number of further "spill-over" effects on other aspects of election administration such as cutting of other services.²⁴

24. Some universities have done more to respond to the changes in voter registration than others.

- **University of Sheffield:** When students register with the University, they are given the chance to say if they want to be on the electoral roll. Students who agree are given the opportunity to provide their details and the information is then securely transferred to Sheffield City Council, who check if they are eligible before adding them to the electoral register.²⁵

- **University of Oxford:** Oxford City Council have sought to raise student registration rates and pre-empt any problems by working with colleges on where to send individuals' self-registration forms.
- **University of York:** A page on the university's website instructs students how to get themselves on the register and points students towards the City of York Council and the national 'Register to vote' website.²⁶

Case study: Manchester City Council²⁷

The 2011 Census suggested there were 70,086 full-time students aged between 18 and 24 in Manchester, making up 13.9 per cent of the total 503,127 residents. The electoral register included 11,564 people registered in student halls and 17,865 at houses known to contain students, but data matching confirmed only 119 (1 per cent) of those in halls and 7,578 (42 per cent) of those in 'known student houses'.²⁸

Therefore invitations to register, which are usually sent to people whose details do not match, were suppressed for 20,000+ students. The City Council instead chose to work with Manchester Student Homes to discover the potential maximum number of voters and with local universities to obtain students' names, addresses and email details. The Electoral Registration Officer took the prescribed statutory steps to review the entitlement of the unconfirmed students. This involved waiting for students to return from their summer break to their new accommodation and reviewing their previous addresses against Council Tax data to ensure they had moved.

Data analysis highlights which individuals have applied to register via the national online portal and which students still need to be targeted by electoral services. A 'dedicated student canvass and a property based intelligence approach' are then used to complete the gaps.

Other activity includes:

- an agreement with Manchester Metropolitan University to embed the electoral registration system within the student enrolment process; and
- a project with the University of Manchester's Volunteering and Community Engagement Team.

Case study: Cardiff University Students' Union²⁹

Cardiff University Students' Union are focusing on:

- Encouraging students to register by: including information and links during the online enrolment process; signing students up when they collect their student cards with staff in GE15 branded t-shirts; integrating a voter registration page into the Students' Union's website; and providing voter registration forms in the reception space and student newspaper. A marketing campaign around these activities is raising awareness of the importance of registering.
- Ensuring students are informed about who they are voting for and their policies. The Union is contacting local MPs with a list of questions related to students that will be published on their website and to which students will be directed.
- Emphasising the impact students can have by voting in Cardiff by publishing statistics of previous elections and encouraging students to understand that they spend a significant amount of the year in their university city.

Turnout

25. Turnout has long been lower among younger people in Britain. The table below, based on the British Election Study, shows not only that older people have been more likely than younger people to vote but also that the turnout gap between those aged 18 to 24 and those aged over 65 has widened dramatically since 1992.³⁰ The gap reached a peak of 36 percentage points in 2005. Although turnout among younger people recovered somewhat at the 2010 election, little more than a half of 18 to 24 year olds voted.

Turnout by age at general elections between 1992 and 2010 (%)

	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010
18-24	67.3	54.1	40.4	38.2	51.8
25-34	77.3	62.2	45.0	47.7	57.3
35-44	78.3	70.2	55.7	61.6	64.4
45-54	81.8	76.4	63.2	65.5	67.5
55-64	78.1	79.9	64.0	72.6	69.8
65+	79.2	77.7	70.1	74.3	74.7
All	77.7	71.4	59.4	61.3	65.0

British Election Study, as used by the House of Commons Library Standard Note, *Elections: Turnout* (July 2013)

26. There are differences in the political participation of sub-groups of young people according to their gender, ethnicity, social class and education. Research projects led by Matt Henn indicate young students are more engaged than non-students and more likely to vote.³¹ The British Election Study internet surveys suggest that, among 18 to 24 year olds, the turnout of full-time university students is higher than for others – by 8 percentage points in 2005 and by 10 points in 2010.

27. So the problem of low turnout among the youngest people eligible to vote is less severe for students in higher education than others. Yet the most qualified young people are still less likely to vote than the least qualified people aged 55 and over.³² While students are not one of the groups with the very lowest levels of turnout, they are well below average. There is a strong case for targeted interventions to encourage greater student participation.

Higher Education Policy and the Student Vote, 1997-2010

28. Since the turn of the century, student issues – particularly undergraduate finance – have featured heavily in all three general elections. The student vote has changed more than the votes of others in response to developments in higher education policy. In particular, students became less likely to vote Labour and more likely to vote Liberal Democrat between 1997 and 2010. This had particularly important implications for constituencies with large proportions of students. The student vote has since become less favourable to the Liberal Democrats. In addition to being more favourable to parties that offer more generous funding, our analysis suggests students punished apparent breaches of promise by Labour after the 2001 election and by the Liberal Democrats after the 2010 election.

29. The majority of students at a general election are no longer students by the time of the next election. So in comparing the student vote across elections we are comparing different groups of people, not the same group changing their behaviour. So, while the analysis here cannot definitively show that individual students are responding to political events, students as a group seem to respond in a way that is consistent with their group interests. In this respect, it is remarkable the extent to which the student vote has responded to the tuition fee policies of parties and punished apparent broken promises.

1997

30. As full-time university students constitute only 3 per cent of the population, to be able to say anything with a reasonable degree of confidence about the voting behaviour of students relative to the rest of the electorate requires surveys with large numbers of respondents. The largest and highest-quality surveys after each election are part of the academic-led British Election Study series. In 1997, their post-election survey suggested that the vote shares for each of the three main parties among those in full-time higher education was very similar to that for other respondents, with any difference inside the margin of statistical error.

31. This might be surprising, given that the caricature of students assumes they are disproportionately likely to be on the left of the political spectrum. But the political views of vocal student activists are not representative of all students and it is worth noting that Labour were popular among students and voters as a whole in 1997:

- i. the British Election Study suggests the students were *no more* likely to have voted Labour than others;
- ii. students are disproportionately from middle-class backgrounds with one or more of their parents having a degree, which are factors that mitigate against voting Labour; and
- iii. students in 1997 were more supportive of Labour than graduates and those with middle-class jobs.

32. At the 1997 election, the main political parties took different stances on student finance:

- **Labour Party:** 'The improvement and expansion needed cannot be funded out of general taxation.'
- **The Conservative Party:** 'We will ensure consistently high standards and will consult on the development of higher education when we receive the results of the Dearing Review.'
- **Liberal Democrats:** 'We will replace the Student Loans Scheme with a fair repayment scheme linked to salaries in later life. We oppose top-up fees for tuition.'

With Labour as the only major party suggesting university students would have to pay for part of the cost of their education, it is perhaps unsurprising that students were not dramatically more enthusiastic about the prospect of a Labour government than the rest of the population.

33. The Labour Government rejected the 1997 Dearing Committee's recommendation of income-contingent tuition fee loans in favour of upfront income-related tuition fees of £1,000, which began in 1998. It also switched the maintenance system to a wholly loan-based one, which was unpopular among many students and was hard to square with a desire to broaden educational participation.³³ These fees were abolished for Scotland in 2001, and so the discussion hereafter is for England and Wales only.

2001

34. The parties again took different positions on higher education finance at the 2001 general election:

- **Labour** defended their actions and vowed: 'We will not introduce "top-up" fees and have legislated to prevent them.'³⁴
- **The Conservative Party** promised only minor changes in their manifesto: 'Under Labour, student loans must be repaid as soon as a graduate's income reaches £10,000 per year. With us, graduates will not have to pay anything unless and until their income tops £20,000 per year. And we will not introduce top-up fees.'³⁵
- **The Liberal Democrats** committed to abolish tuition fees and 'restore grants for poor students and access to benefits for all during the summer holidays, and raise the salary threshold at which student loans are repaid, in the first instance from £10,000 to £13,000 per year.'³⁶

35. The impact on the student vote was dramatic. Even with just 66 respondents in full-time education in the 2001 British Election Study survey, it is clear that students were much more likely to vote Liberal Democrat.

36. We can also assess the voting patterns of students by analysing constituency election results in conjunction with census statistics. The UK census does not provide data on the number of full-time higher education students but it is possible to obtain data on the percentage of normally-resident adult population in full-time secondary, tertiary or

higher education. While this is a broad definition of students, the constituencies with the highest proportions of students are likely to be the places with the most students in higher education. The following table shows average changes in the share of the vote for each of the three main parties in constituencies with fewer than 10 per cent students and those with more than 10 per cent. The pro-tuition fee parties did worse and the Liberal Democrats better in constituencies with more students.

Average changes in vote share from 1997 to 2001 by student population (%)

	Conservative	Labour	Lib Dem	(N)
More than 10% students	-2.5	-2.6	+5.4	(11)
Less than 10% students	+1.2	-2.0	+1.2	(555)
Difference	-3.7	-0.6	+4.2	

Note: England and Wales only. N = the number of constituencies. Student population based on 1991 census data which include non-university students.

37. The pattern in the table above holds more broadly: in general, the more students there were the better the Liberal Democrats did. **Without the differential swing in student areas in 2001, the Liberal Democrats would not have gained Guildford from the Conservatives and the Conservatives would have won Lancaster & Wyre from Labour.** Meanwhile, other constituencies were made much more marginal than they might otherwise have been. The fact that

more constituency results were not changed is primarily because of the relatively few contests in which Labour and the Liberal Democrats were the leading two parties and the gap was close. More generally, relatively few seats with large student populations were marginal, and that remains the case.

38. Both the survey data and constituency results suggest the rise in the Liberal Democrat student vote in 2001 came more from the Conservatives than from Labour. Perhaps the Tory student vote suffered most because they had moved from ambivalence in 1997 to accepting tuition fees in 2001, whereas Labour maintained a policy of students paying part of the costs of their education. Thus the change in the pattern of student votes between 1997 and 2001, relative to the electorate at large, fits the pattern of change in the generosity of party policy to students between these elections.

39. Instead of maintaining the post-1998 system, Labour legislated for a new system of tuition fees in office after the 2001 general election. As a result of the Higher Education Act (2004), full-time undergraduate students faced a new variable fee capped at £3,000 a year and backed by an income-contingent loan that began in autumn 2006.

2005

40. At the 2005 general election, the Conservatives joined the Liberal Democrats in promising to scrap tuition fees, although for the Tories this would in part be paid for by the introduction of commercial rates of interest on student loans.³⁷ Labour meanwhile promised that the impending annual fees would not rise above £3,000 during the following Parliament (except in line with inflation).³⁸

41. The British Election Study 2005 internet survey had a larger sample size than the traditional face-to-face random sample survey, which makes it possible to look at the differences between students and other voters. The table on the next page shows that students were 10 percentage points more likely to vote Liberal Democrat and 9 points less likely to vote Tory than other respondents. The difference in the Labour vote is not statistically significant.³⁹

42. These results are fairly similar to those for 2001, so there is only a small sign that students punished Labour for appearing to renege on their tuition fee promise. However, the sample size of students is still relatively small (at 183) and if we look at the pattern of change in actual constituency results it seems that the overall swing from Labour to the Liberal Democrats in 2005 was stronger in places with more than 10 per cent students. These figures suggest that Labour was punished at the ballot box by students to the benefit of the Liberal Democrats.

Share of the vote 2005 by full-time student status (%)

	Student	Other	Difference
Con	23	32	-9
Lab	34	37	-3
LD	34	24	+10
Green	3	1	+2
UKIP	3	4	-1
Other	4	2	+2
Total	100	100	
(N)	(183)	(4393)	

Note: British Election Study Post-Election Internet survey. England and Wales only.

Average changes in vote share from 2001 to 2005 by student population (%)

	Conservative	Labour	Lib Dem	(N)
>10% students	+0.4	-5.6	+3.3	(79)
<10% students	-0.7	-8.7	+6.6	(424)
Difference	-1.1	-3.1	+3.3	

Note: England and Wales only. N = the number of constituencies. Student population based on 2001 census data which include non-university students.

43. Disapproval of Britain's involvement in the Iraq war and corresponding negative opinions of Tony Blair were important reasons why the overall swing in 2005 was from Labour to the Liberal Democrats. So it may be that students swung more

heavily to the Liberal Democrats because they were more concerned about the Iraq war, but the British Election Study data suggest that if anything university students were marginally more, not less, likely to approve of the war than were the rest of the population. This makes it more likely that the change in the student vote was due primarily to the tuition fee issue.

44. Despite the Conservatives' apparently more generous policy towards students, they continued to face further electoral disadvantage among students. **But the drop in the student Tory vote was less than that in the student Labour vote, and this tipped the balance in Reading East to the Conservatives. Meanwhile the Liberal Democrats probably won Manchester Withington and Leeds North West from Labour as a result of the extra Labour to Liberal Democrat swing among students.** As in 2001, the proximity of other contests was affected even if the result did not change, and a major reason why the student vote was not more pivotal is that Labour-Liberal Democrat contests were still fairly few.

2010

45. In the run-up to the 2010 election, Labour set up a review of higher education chaired by John Browne, which did not report until after the election. Both the Conservatives and Labour were silent in their manifestos about their preferences for future developments on student funding.⁴⁰ In effect, this meant both parties were sounding less generous to students than they had done in 2005, but the Conservatives' position had moved more than Labour's had. Again, by contrast, the Liberal Democrats continued promising to scrap tuition fees, now saying they could be phased out over six years.⁴¹ Moreover, all of the successful Liberal Democrat candidates signed a commitment produced by the NUS, which stated:

I pledge to vote against any increase in fees in the next parliament and to pressure the government to introduce a fairer alternative.

46. As the table overleaf shows, the 2010 British Election Study internet-based survey suggests that student voters were even more strongly Liberal Democrat than they were in 2005, with the student:other gap widening by 6 points. The Conservatives' relative unpopularity among students grew slightly. Conversely, while the Labour Party's vote fell sharply overall between 2005 and 2010, the student Labour vote held up rather better and so narrowed the previous gap between students and others by 4 points. This may represent the unravelling of the punishment students inflicted on Labour in 2001. Otherwise, the pattern of change since 2005 relative

to other voters suggests that as a group students were responding to changes in the relative generosity of the higher education policies of the main parties.

Share of the vote 2010 by full time university student status (%)

	Student	Other	Difference	Change in Difference since 2005
Con	23	36	-13	-4
Lab	28	27	+1	+4
LD	44	28	+16	+6
Green	3	1	+2	0
UKIP	2	4	-2	-1
Other	2	3	-1	-3
Total	100	100		
(N)	(263)	(11917)		

Notes: British Election Study Post-Election Internet survey. England and Wales only.

47. At a constituency level, the Labour vote held up considerably better in areas with more students than elsewhere. However, this is partly but not entirely an artefact of an important ethnic composition effect whereby Labour did better in areas where people with ethnic minority backgrounds make up a greater proportion of the electorate, many of which also have relatively large numbers of students.⁴²

48. Once ethnic composition is controlled for, it is clearer to see how party performance was related to the size of the student population. So the table below is restricted to just those constituencies in England and Wales with fewer than 10 per cent non-white residents. The table shows that in such places the Liberal Democrats, and to a lesser extent, Labour did better where there were more students, while the Conservatives did worse. There is a similar pattern for the more ethnically diverse constituencies too. These findings broadly fit with the evidence from the survey data that the student vote again responded to changes in higher education policy proposals.

Average changes in vote share from 2005 to 2010 by student population (%)

	Conservative	Labour	Lib Dem	(N)
>10% students	+3.6	-7.8	+2.8	(36)
<10% students	+4.3	-8.6	+1.6	(405)
Difference	-0.7	+0.8	+1.2	

Note: Constituencies in England and Wales with fewer than 10% non-white residents only. N = the number of constituencies. Population data based on 2001 census data which include non-university students.

49. Overall then, the 2010 election was yet again one in which the pattern of change in the student vote broadly seems to have reflected the changing positions of the parties on higher education funding. The Conservative Party’s position hardened the most and students proved more resistant to

them than others. Students apparently rewarded the Liberal Democrats for their consistently generous offer. Labour's slightly better performance among students, relative to the general population, which happened despite their ambivalence towards further fee increases, probably reflects an unwinding of the 2005 student penalty. It may also represent less appetite among students for a Conservative government.

Higher Education Policy and the Student Vote, 2010 onwards

50. With the publication of the Browne report soon after the 2010 election, there was upheaval in undergraduate funding. The Conservative and Liberal Democrat Coalition raised the fee cap to £9,000 a year. The move was unpopular, particularly among students, some 78 per cent of whom opposed the plans.⁴³ Some of the protests turned violent.

51. This change in tuition fees did not apply to Scotland, and the Welsh government opted to provide grants to offset the fees for Welsh students studying in Wales or elsewhere in the UK. The remainder of the analysis for this section is restricted to England on the basis that only there does the policy change apply with full force.

52. Students were particularly angry that the Liberal Democrats did not keep their pre-election pledge to vote against any increase in tuition fees. Polls have consistently shown a disproportionately large swing from the Liberal Democrats to Labour among students.⁴⁴ Data on general election voting intention from the British Election Study internet panel survey, conducted in February and March 2014 and presented in the table overleaf, shows that the student vote for the Liberal Democrats dropped from 44 per cent at the 2010 general election to just 13 per cent. The fall in the Lib Dem vote among non-students was smaller, so the gap in the Liberal Democrat vote between students and non-students narrowed by 11 points, to just 4 points.

Share of the general election vote intention in 2014 by full-time student status (%)

	Student	Other	Difference	Change in Difference since 2010
Con	29	34	-5	+9
Lab	45	38	+7	+5
LD	13	9	+4	-11
Green	5	3	+2	0
UKIP	7	15	-8	-5
Other	1	2	-1	0
Total	100	100		
(N)	(378)	(11917)		

Notes: British Election Study Post-Election Internet survey Feb-March 2014. England only.

53. The table confirms the Labour Party became the most popular party among students, not only absolutely but also relative to the rest of the population. The Conservatives have also benefited from the swing away from the Liberal Democrats among students. This would be a little odd if it were purely a reaction against the hike in tuition fees, but students might be keener to punish the Liberal Democrats for their breach of promise than they are to punish the Tories for the rise in fees.

54. The biggest gap between the voting intentions of students and others is for the UK Independence Party (UKIP), which continues to remain about half as popular among students as it is among other voters. This is primarily because students are much less likely than others to hold the kind of Eurosceptic, anti-immigrant and socially-authoritarian views espoused by the party. Since UKIP support has typically been drawn from previous Conservative supporters, the low appeal of UKIP to students has made it easier for the student Tory vote to recover.

55. In addition to general election voting intention, we can consider how people voted at the 2014 European Parliament elections as an indication of the current standing of the parties among students. Since the European Union has limited competence over higher education funding, there is less reason to expect votes to depend on the issue at European Parliament elections than at general elections. There are also other issues that usually come to the fore in Euro elections, especially European integration and migration. Nonetheless, voters often use Euro elections to send a signal, so we might still expect to see a swing away from the governing parties as a result of the higher tuition fees.

56. The difference between student and non-student voting at the European Parliament elections in the table is most striking for UKIP and the Greens. **While UKIP won the share of the vote overall, among students they were the fifth largest party with a vote share of 11 per cent, about a third of the**

size of that for the party among non-students. Meanwhile, the Greens were much more popular among students than others. The student:other gaps for the three main parties are not statistically significant. This means that the Liberal Democrats' large advantage among students in 2009 has been at least much diminished if not almost entirely lost.

Share of the 2014 European Parliament vote by full time university student status (%)

	Student	Other	Difference
Con	25	22	+3
Lab	24	27	-3
LD	13	9	+4
Green	25	9	+14
UKIP	11	31	-20
Other	1	3	-2
Total	100	100	
(N)	(354)	(14355)	

Notes: British Election Study Post-Election Internet survey May-June 2014. England only.

57. The picture for the 2014 Euro election results fits that for the general election vote intention in suggesting a bigger drop for the Liberal Democrats and a much more limited rise of UKIP among students than among non-students since 2010. The key difference is that, whereas the student vote seems to have shifted from the Liberal Democrats to the Greens at the Euro elections, the shift is more towards Labour

for the general election. **Many of the students who voted Green at the Euros appear to intend voting Labour instead at the 2015 general election.** This is a tendency that could be further reinforced by incentives at the constituency level to vote tactically that were largely absent in the proportional electoral system used for the European elections.

58. Looking at European election results by council area provides a further means of identifying change in the student vote.⁴⁵ The table below shows mean changes in party vote share across local authorities, weighted by the number of electors. The Labour vote went up more where over 15 per cent of the 16 to 74 year old population were full-time students. This increase seems to have come partly from the Liberal Democrats whose vote fell by 1.4 points more in such areas than elsewhere. But it also seems as though Labour picked up some votes in student areas that might otherwise have gone to UKIP. **Overall, UKIP did 2.5 points worse in areas with large student populations (and also fared less well in areas with more graduates).**

Weighted average changes in vote share from 2009 to 2014 European Parliament elections by student population

	Conservative	Labour	Lib Dem	Green	UKIP	(N)
>15% students	-3.5	+12.9	-8.3	-0.9	+9.7	(22)
<15% students	-3.6	+9.2	-6.9	-1.0	+12.2	(305)
Difference	+0.1	+3.7	-1.4	+0.1	-2.5	

Note: Local authority areas in England only. N = the number of authorities. Population figures based on 2011 census data which include non-university students and based on 16 to 74 year olds. Figures are mean changes weighted by electorate size.

59. The patterns in the table above for the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and UKIP have been confirmed by statistical regression analysis with controls for other factors influencing the pattern of change across councils. However, once other factors are accounted for (especially prior strength), then Labour do not appear to have risen any more in student areas, but the Green Party hold up much better in student areas than elsewhere. These findings fit rather better with the survey results than the average change figures in the table above.

60. Both the individual survey data and local authority results suggest that students have largely resisted the rise of UKIP while shifting their support primarily from the Liberal Democrats to the Greens at the 2014 European Parliament elections. However, student voting intentions suggest that Labour, rather than the Greens, are more likely to benefit if students continue to want to punish the Liberal Democrats at next year's general election.

Implications for the 2015 general election

61. If the broad pattern of changes in general election voting intention since 2010 are maintained at the 2015 election, as there is good reason to expect them to be, then there is likely to be a somewhat better Labour and worse Liberal Democrat performance in constituencies with relatively large numbers of students. The table starting overleaf shows English constituencies with more than 13 per cent of the 16 to 74 year old population in full-time secondary, tertiary or higher education in the 2011 census. The constituencies are organised by winning party and second party and then sorted by the percentage point margin of victory in 2010. The focus here is on England since that is the only country where the full force of the additional tuition fees is being felt.

62. Opinion polls at the time of writing show voting intention for the Conservatives has dropped by about 4 points since the 2010 election and by 13 points for the Liberal Democrats, while it has risen by 6 points for Labour. If these changes were replicated uniformly across the country, then none of the Labour-Conservative, Labour-Liberal Democrat and Conservative-Liberal Democrat seats in the table would change hands.⁴⁶ Most of the constituencies with large student populations are in one of these groups. As the pattern of change in the student vote since 2010 is broadly in the same direction as that for the rest of the population, only stronger, the ability of students to influence seat outcomes at the next election is limited by their tendency to reside in constituencies that are likely to be safe for the incumbent party, particularly Labour-held seats.

Constituencies in England with more than 13% student population, sorted by margin of victory of the winning party over the second party

Students %	Constituency	2010 shares (%)			
		Con	Lab	LD	Majority %
<i>Con 1st, Lab 2nd 2010</i>					
13.5	Hendon	42.3	42.1	12.4	0.2
21.7	Lancaster & Fleetwood	36.1	35.3	19.1	0.8
14.4	Lincoln	37.5	35.2	20.2	2.3
20.2	Plymouth Sutton & Devonport	34.3	31.7	24.7	2.6
15.0	Brighton Kemptown	38.0	34.9	18.0	3.1
20.8	Loughborough	41.6	34.5	18.3	7.1
17.0	Uxbridge & South Ruislip	48.3	23.4	20.0	24.9
13.6	Cities of London & Westminster	52.2	22.2	20.5	30.0
18.0	Welwyn Hatfield	57.0	21.4	16.4	35.6
<i>Con 1st, LD 2nd 2010</i>					
13.6	Oxford West & Abingdon	42.3	10.6	42.0	0.3
15.8	Romsey & Southampton North	49.7	6.4	41.3	8.5
24.0	Canterbury	44.8	16.1	32.5	12.3
16.0	Bournemouth West	45.1	14.8	31.7	13.4
16.1	Guildford	53.3	5.1	39.3	14.0
15.9	Reading East	42.6	25.5	27.3	15.2
<i>Lab 1st, Con 2nd 2010</i>					
13.6	Southampton Itchen	36.3	36.8	20.8	0.4
13.4	Derby North	31.7	33.0	28.0	1.4
18.2	Birmingham Edgbaston	37.6	40.6	15.4	3.1
13.3	Newcastle Under Lyme	34.4	38.0	19.6	3.6
34.5	Nottingham South	32.9	37.3	23.1	4.3

Students	Constituency	2010 shares (%)			
		Con	Lab	LD	Majority
%					%
19.5	Exeter	33.0	38.2	20.3	5.2
17.2	Southampton Test	33.0	38.5	22.3	5.5
14.7	Luton South	29.4	34.9	22.7	5.5
22.2	Birmingham Selly Oak	31.1	38.5	22.3	7.5
24.2	Coventry South	33.4	41.8	18.0	8.4
14.1	Huddersfield	27.8	38.8	24.7	11
18.0	York Central	26.1	40.0	25.2	13.9
16.4	Bradford West	31.1	45.3	11.7	14.2
13.8	Brent North	31.5	46.9	17.0	15.4
14.7	Ilford South	27.4	49.4	17.0	22.0
13.3	Greenwich & Woolwich	24.5	49.2	18.2	24.7
17.7	West Ham	14.7	62.7	11.5	48.0
19.8	East Ham	15.2	70.4	11.6	55.2
<i>Lab 1st, LD 2nd 2010</i>					
38.1	Sheffield Central	10.1	41.3	40.9	0.4
16.8	Hull North	13.1	39.2	37.3	1.9
20.5	Durham, City Of	13.3	44.3	37.7	6.6
15.5	Islington South & Finsbury	19.4	42.3	34.1	8.2
27.7	Oxford East	18.8	42.5	33.6	8.9
31.4	Newcastle Upon Tyne East	16.0	45.0	33.3	11.8
13.4	Stoke On Trent Central	21.0	38.8	21.7	17.1
26.3	Manchester Gorton	11.0	50.1	32.6	17.5
20.6	Holborn & St. Pancras	20.4	46.1	27.9	18.2
24.8	Leicester South	21.4	45.6	26.9	18.7
14.9	Liverpool Wavertree	7.5	53.1	34.2	18.9
21.2	Nottingham East	23.7	45.4	24.3	21.0

Students %	Constituency	2010 shares (%)			
		Con	Lab	LD	Majority %
19.1	Newcastle Upon Tyne Central	19.4	45.9	24.1	21.9
17.1	Bethnal Green & Bow	13.9	42.9	20.1	22.8
17.4	Preston	21.7	48.2	24.4	23.8
13.6	Middlesbrough	18.8	45.9	19.9	26.0
29.1	Manchester Central	11.8	52.7	26.6	26.1
23.3	Birmingham Ladywood	11.9	55.7	27.5	28.2
13.5	Birmingham Perry Barr	21.3	50.3	22.0	28.3
24.9	Leeds Central	20.2	49.3	20.8	28.5
14.4	Lewisham Deptford	13.5	53.7	23.4	30.3
30.9	Liverpool Riverside	10.9	59.3	22.7	36.5
13.7	Camberwell & Peckham	13.0	59.2	22.4	36.8
13.9	Tottenham	14.9	59.3	17.7	41.6
<i>LD 1st, Con 2nd 2010</i>					
24.2	Portsmouth South	33.3	13.7	45.9	12.6
13.6	Kingston & Surbiton	36.5	9.3	49.8	13.2
27.5	Cambridge	25.6	24.3	39.1	13.5
28.6	Leeds North West	26.6	21.0	47.5	20.9
22.4	Bath	31.4	6.9	56.6	25.2
17.3	Sheffield Hallam	23.5	16.1	53.4	29.9
<i>LD 1st, Lab 2nd 2010</i>					
17.8	Norwich South	22.9	28.7	29.4	0.7
20.1	Manchester Withington	11.1	40.5	44.7	4.2
16.6	Bermondsey & Old Southwark	17.1	29.2	48.4	19.1
24.3	Bristol West	18.4	27.5	48.0	20.5

Note: Data on student population size from 2011 census, which gives percentage of 16 to 74 year olds in full time secondary, tertiary or higher education.

63. The situation in Conservative-Labour, Liberal Democrat-Conservative and Liberal Democrat-Labour seats is more complicated to assess and is sensitive to the extent of the national swing.

- **Conservative-Labour:** Under uniform national change with current polls, seats the Conservatives won with a margin of less than 10 percentage points over Labour would be (re)gained by Labour. Most (six) of the Con-Lab seats with more than 13 per cent students fall into this category and so would be lost by the Tories without any extra penalty from the student vote, and the remaining three are safe. **However, if the Conservatives do make a recovery in the polls between now and the election, the six most marginal Conservative-Labour student constituencies might well fall to Labour because of the student vote even if Labour do not generally make gains from the Tories. They are: Hendon; Lancaster & Fleetwood; Lincoln; Plymouth Sutton & Devonport; Brighton Kemptown; and Loughborough.**
- **Liberal Democrat-Conservative:** With current polls and uniform change the Liberal Democrats would lose the seats they are defending against the Conservatives with a margin of less than 9 points. None of these has a significant student population. **However, if – relative to the national average – the student vote for the Liberal Democrats falls more heavily than that for the Conservatives, then Liberal Democrat/Conservative student seats and margins just greater than 9 points become vulnerable. In particular,**

the Conservatives might win Portsmouth South and Kingston & Surbiton as a result of students punishing the Liberal Democrats for tuition fees more heavily than they punish the Tories.⁴⁷

- **Liberal Democrat-Labour:** The final and most important category of seats that might be affected by differential student vote swing is that of Liberal Democrat seats where Labour came second. Again on national polls with uniform change, the Liberal Democrats would be expected to lose any such seat with a margin of victory up to as much as around 19 points. **This comfortably includes the two student seats of Manchester Withington and Norwich South which look very difficult for the Liberal Democrats to hold without a major revival in support. Two further seats with large student populations (Bermondsey & Old Southwark and Bristol West) might be won by Labour from the Liberal Democrats if there is an extra Liberal to Labour swing in the student vote, as the analysis above suggests there is likely to be. However, Bristol West is the subject of an intensive campaign by the Green Party, which might disrupt this pattern.**

64. Finally, the one Green Party seat, Brighton Pavilion, was narrowly won from Labour in 2010. On current national trend alone, both parties would make gains but the seat would again be tightly fought. **However, given the big Green vote among students at the Euro elections nationally, the constituency's student population seems likely to play a pivotal role in determining whether the seat stays Green.**

65. Overall then, given current polls and what we know about the developments in party support among the student population, 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. The Liberal Democrats could end up losing four seats (two to Labour and two to the Conservatives) as a result of a greater collapse in the party's vote among students than other kinds of voters. Based on uniform change projections, the Liberal Democrats might only win 21 seats. To lose a further four because of the student reaction to tuition fees would be a substantial proportion if not a large absolute number.

66. Conversely, the only student seats in England that look safe for the Liberal Democrats on the above analysis are Bath, Leeds North West and Sheffield Hallam. The last of these is the constituency of Liberal Democrat leader and Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg. It not only has a significant student population but also the highest proportion (43 per cent) of its employees working in public-service jobs in health, education, social work and public administration. Many of these work in higher education and public service workers generally have been affected by austerity measures. So despite a large majority at the last election, even Nick Clegg's seat may not be safe.

Conclusion

67. Students have as much right to be on the electoral register as everyone else but they face greater obstacles than many others in being able to exercise their democratic rights. Registering students on the electoral roll is complicated because so many full-time students live away from home and have two addresses during the year. These challenges have long existed, but they are set to get worse as the electoral registration system changes from a household-based one to an individualised one.

68. There is a risk that the democratic voice of students, which is particularly important in a small number of constituencies, could be diluted by the new bureaucratic hurdles associated with individual voter registration. It is incumbent upon those with an interest in higher education and participatory politics to work for higher student registration rates. Some important work on this is already happening:

- the NUS and individual students' unions are promoting registration among students, as is Liam Byrne, the Shadow Secretary of State for Universities and Science, and Paul Blomfield, the Chair of a new All-Party Group on Students;
- some educational institutions are working closely with their local councils as well as with third parties, such as private halls of residence, to facilitate registration and distribute information; and
- many councils are seeking to operate in new ways to encourage registration.

69. Early indications are that those higher education institutions that have worked with councils to embed voter registration in to the student enrolment process, as at Manchester Metropolitan University and Sheffield University, have found a particularly successful model. It is not infallible because students still need to know whether they are entitled to register – many international students, for example, are not – and they need to have their National Insurance Number with them in order to complete the process. But early fears that data protection requirements could block such initiatives appear to have been unfounded.⁴⁸

70. There is a need to share best practice. The Cabinet Office's Student Forum brings together organisations from the education sector, students and local authorities to help raise the registration rate of students. It meets at a regional level and serves as a portal to share good practice across all local authorities. There is a particular need to evaluate the new electoral registration rules in the run-up to, and aftermath of, the 2015 general election. Some of the difficulties posed by shifting to a new voter registration system are one off, but ensuring high registration among students is likely to prove a permanent challenge.

71. Encouraging students and other young people to vote is about more than registration. Although it would not necessarily foster positive engagement, compulsory voting, perhaps aimed specifically at young people, would at least substantially increase turnout and so reduce inequalities in

the extent to which the preferences of different social groups are represented in the electoral process. Other initiatives aimed at encouraging registration and turnout – such as enabling young people to register up to and on polling day itself – could help increase the democratic participation of young people.⁴⁹

72. Assuming that students vote in similar numbers as previously, that recent surveys and the European Parliament election are indicative of the ways in which the student vote will differ from the overall vote and that recent opinion polls are close to the final result overall, then it seems that the result in a small number of constituencies – around 10 – are likely to depend on the choices of student voters. **The main beneficiaries, depending on their final manifesto position on student issues, look set to be the Labour Party. In terms of the number of seats, the main losers could be the Conservatives but, as a proportion of their total representation in the House of Commons, the Liberal Democrats may fare worst.**

73. Given the likelihood of a close election in 2015, and despite the introduction of individual voter registration, that means students could wield sufficient electoral power to influence the parliamentary arithmetic and even which party or parties form the government.

74. Whatever the electoral power of students turns out to be in 2015, the new tuition fee system could have a long-term electoral impact. In a decade or two, there will be millions of

electors who need money for childcare and mortgages but who cannot see the end of their student loan repayments.⁵⁰ So, however reasonable student loans look on paper now, the students of today may become a more powerful electoral force as the graduates of tomorrow.

Notes and references

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- ³ National Union of Students, 'Students could swing almost 200 seats at the General Election', press release, 6 October 2014.
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- ¹⁶ This process began in June 2014 in England but the start was delayed until September 2014 in Scotland in order not to disrupt the Scottish referendum on independence.
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- ⁴⁵ The corresponding census data give the number of students in full-time secondary, tertiary or higher education as a percentage of 16 to 74 year olds. By including 16 and 17 year olds in the calculation, the overall proportion of students is greater than with the census data used in earlier tables. But the places with the highest proportions of this kind are likely to be the places with the greatest proportion of higher education students.
- ⁴⁶ There are three Conservative-Liberal Democrat marginals – Oxford West & Abingdon, Romsey and Southampton North – which might actually be safer for the Tories as a result of student reactions to tuition fees.
- ⁴⁷ In Cambridge, Labour could jump from third to first place on current polls but the seat has not always stuck closely to national trends.
- ⁴⁸ The Representation of the People Act (1983) lets Electoral Registration Officers request information from universities to ensure people are registered to vote, but students should be told their data can be shared for this purpose. It is sensible to have a data sharing agreement in place.
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It is often said that students are a particularly powerful group of voters. The authors set out to test this assertion, which turns out to be half true.

A number of factors must be present for the student voice to be heard at the ballot box. To make a difference, students must:

- register to vote;
- turn out to vote;
- be in marginal constituencies; and
- behave differently from other voters.

Detailed analysis of electoral data suggests full-time students could determine the outcome in only around ten constituencies. But that is conceivably enough to swing the overall result of the 2015 general election.

The pamphlet also considers the impact of Individual Electoral Registration on students, and investigates what higher education institutions can do to protect and enhance the democratic voice of students.



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

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