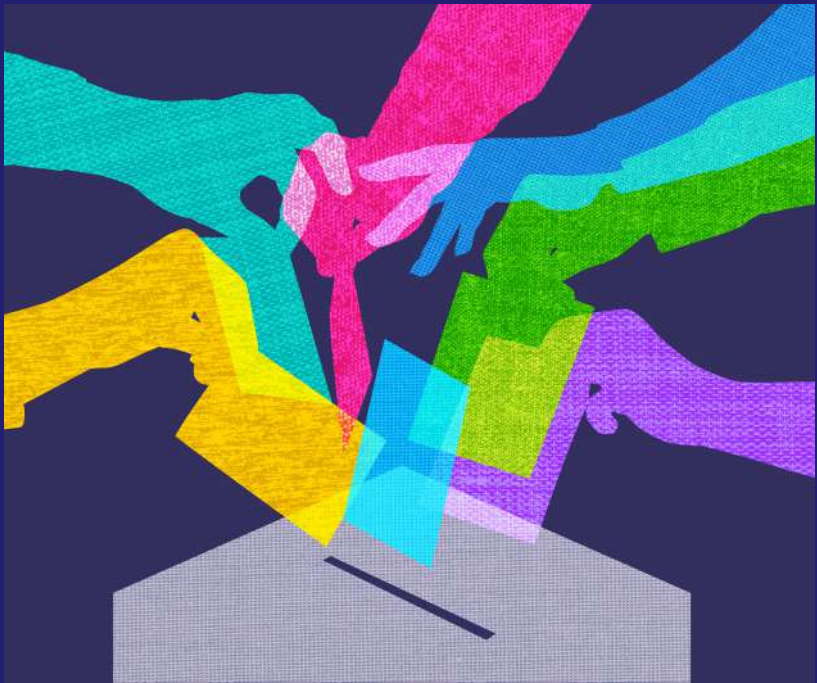


# Student voters: Did they make a difference?

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## **About the author**

Nick Hillman has been the Director of HEPI since January 2014. Given the topic of this paper, he declares an interest as the Conservative candidate in Cambridge at the 2010 general election.

## Executive Summary

- The run up to the 2019 general election saw huge debate on the likely importance of the student vote to the result. This paper takes the 25 parliamentary constituencies in the UK with the highest proportion of students – where students make up more than 17.5% of the population – to try and assess what role students played in 2019 and the previous three general elections in 2010, 2015 and 2017.
- It is easy to exaggerate the importance of the student vote because of the conditions that must be in place for students to alter the outcome in any constituency. However, students have proved decisive in some places – for example, students helped Labour win both Canterbury and Leeds North West in 2017 and hold them in 2019, and students are also likely to have helped Labour hold the marginal seat of Coventry South in 2019.
- In England, Labour do much better in constituencies with lots of students than they do overall and the Conservatives do considerably worse. In both instances, the gap has been growing at every recent election. In 2019, Labour's share of the vote was 25 percentage points higher in English student seats than in England as a whole (compared to 11 percentage points in 2010) while the Conservatives' vote share was 25 percentage points lower in student seats than in England as a whole (compared to 17% in 2010).
- In Wales, Labour also do better in student seats while the Conservatives do worse: Labour's additional vote share in the two Welsh student seats included in the study was 16 percentage points in 2019, while the Conservatives won 12 percentage points less in Welsh student seats than in Wales as a whole.

- In Scotland, Labour did worse overall than the Conservatives in 2017 and 2019 but they continued to beat the Conservatives by a considerable margin in student seats. However, the Scottish National Party's overall dominance in Scotland means the SNP are the main beneficiaries of recent electoral trends and they have won decisive victories in student seats at the last three elections.
- The Liberal Democrats were relatively successful in winning the votes of students in 2010. In student seats, they outperformed their results in England as a whole, winning five of the 20 student seats in England and one of the two in Wales (but none of the three in Scotland). However, the Liberal Democrat vote share fell heavily afterwards. In 2019, they performed slightly worse in English student seats than in England as a whole.
- In many seats with the most students, Labour's majority is very large – for example, it is over 70%, or over 37,000 votes, in Liverpool Riverside. So students may often increase the winning candidate's majority rather than change the result. Depending on individual circumstances, they may sometimes have had more impact had they opted to vote in their home constituencies rather than their term-time one.
- Of the 100 election results in the 25 student seats across the whole UK between 2010 and 2019, Labour's tally is 78 wins, compared to nine for the Liberal Democrats and just four for the Conservatives. In addition, the SNP won nine times (out of a possible maximum of 12 in the four Scottish seats covered in the study).
- Minor parties have tended to perform poorly in student seats at recent elections, with no smaller party winning any student seats in the last four general elections. The

perception that the Green Party does particularly well among students is not supported by recent general election results, although this may – in part – reflect tactical voting under the first-past-the-post electoral system. On the other hand, the perception that UKIP and the Brexit Party have earned little support from students is supported by the data, and Plaid Cymru have tended to do worse in Welsh student seats than other Welsh seats.

- There may not be another general election until 2024 and all the main parties could change their attitudes towards student issues between now and then. Yet students do not only care about student issues; they also care about areas affecting the whole of society, like climate change, the NHS and the UK's relations with the rest of the world, including Brexit.
- While the electoral importance of student issues is sometimes exaggerated, the student vote still cannot be taken for granted and will continue to make a difference in some key seats. Indeed, if higher education continues on its long-term trajectory of welcoming more full-time students, the concept of an identifiable student vote could conceivably grow.
- There are well-publicised claims that the process of attending university can alter students' political viewpoints, in particular by pushing them to the left of the political spectrum. Yet while most UK students (and higher education staff) do seem to gravitate towards left-of-centre parties, there is also evidence to suggest attending higher education may determine people's political outlook less than is often supposed.



## Contents

Introduction	9
Methodology	13
Analysis by country	15
Analysis by party	21
Conclusions	31
Endnotes	37





## Introduction

Prior to the 2019 general election, gallons of ink were consumed on articles about whether students would vote, where they would vote, how they would vote and whether they could make a difference to the result. Similarly, in the aftermath of the 2017 general election, there was a lively debate over whether or not the unexpectedly close result between the Conservatives and Labour was due to a 'youthquake'.<sup>1</sup>

HEPI's previous research on student voters concluded that they are a material factor in election results but also that, for students to make a difference to the result in any single constituency, many conditions need to be fulfilled.<sup>2</sup>

At a minimum, students must:

- i. register to vote in the constituency they will be in on election day (yet Individual Electoral Registration has arguably made this more difficult for some students);
- ii. actually vote when election day comes around (yet, in general, student seats tend to have below average turnout);
- iii. vote as a meaningful bloc (or else risk cancelling each other out);
- iv. vote in a different pattern to how the constituency in question would vote if students were not present (or else they will not change the different proportions won by each candidate);
- v. be present in sufficient numbers within a single constituency to make a difference to the result (or else they will make the seat more marginal but not actually affect who wins).

So there is a relatively high bar for students to make a difference in a single constituency let alone in the country as a whole.

The fact that students typically have a choice of two constituencies in which to vote – their term-time address and their home address – complicates any assessment of their importance as a group of voters. Providing them with such a choice over where to vote theoretically enables them to amplify their voice, as they can opt to vote in the more marginal of the two seats. However, a student who lives in a marginal seat in the holidays but who votes in a safer seat at a term-time election will have less, rather than more, impact.<sup>3</sup>

There are 1.4 million full-time UK-domiciled students (plus 0.5 million part-time ones) spread across all UK constituencies but, for the reasons above, the number of constituencies in which student voters typically make a noticeable difference is limited. As a result, students are more likely to be decisive at a national level if the overall result is close than if one party wins a clear majority. This might suggest students were more influential in the 2010 and 2017 elections, when no one party secured an overall majority in the House of Commons, than in 2015 or 2019.

Another important factor is that, because students typically enrol in three-year courses at undergraduate level and one-year courses at postgraduate level, student voters are generally different people from one election to another. It is incorrect to think of student voters as a block that sometimes changes direction. For example, while student voters may have drifted away from the Liberal Democrats between 2010 and 2015, the students voting at these two elections were generally different people rather than the same individuals with shifting allegiances. Even in the ‘early’ election of December 2019, most students were not part of the student electorate at the

previous election held in June 2017 (and many would have been too young to vote at all).

This short report looks more deeply into the question of whether student voters make a difference to election results by:

- taking the 25 constituencies with the highest proportion of full-time students – those where they are thought to make up more than 17.5% of the electorate;
- considering the results in these seats for the last four general elections, in 2010, 2015, 2017 and 2019; and
- comparing the results in these seats to the bigger picture.

The 25 parliamentary constituencies with the highest proportion of full-time students make up nearly 4% of all 650 constituencies in the UK. They are split between England (20 of the 533 seats or 4%), Scotland (three out of the 59 seats or 5%) and Wales (two out of the 40 seats or 5%). As shown in the Appendix, the constituency in England with the highest proportion of students is Sheffield Central, where 34.8% of the population are full-time students; in Wales, it is Cardiff Central, where 30.1% of people are full-time students; and in Scotland, it is Glasgow Central, where 22.5% people are full-time students.

While we caution against reading too much into our conclusions, given the limited nature of the research, there are enough points of interest to make such a study worthwhile. Moreover, although the 25 constituencies in this study make up only around one-in-20 of all the seats in the UK, Theresa May needed to win just eight more seats than she did at the 2017 election to gain an overall majority and David Cameron needed just another 20 to win an overall majority at the 2010 election. So what happens in these 25 seats matters and can

materially affect both the make up of the House of Commons and a party's grip on power.

A number of caveats to our conclusions are discussed in the Methodology section. One especially important caveat is that trends in these seats cannot be entirely ascribed to the presence of students. Student seats, as we will see, tend to vote Labour in much greater proportions than average, but this may be down to other factors (demographic and geographic) as well as the presence of large numbers of students.

The significance or otherwise of the student vote is obviously key to understanding election results and, because of this, it is also important in understanding policy. For example, it is widely thought that the Conservatives in 2001 and 2005, the Liberal Democrats in 1997, 2001, 2005 and 2010 and Labour in 2017 and 2019 opposed tuition fees in part because of the perceived – though possibly exaggerated – electoral benefits.

Sir Keir Starmer, the Labour leader since 2020, may be particularly aware of the electoral relevance of students because his constituency of Holborn and St Pancras has a higher proportion of students than 625 of the rest of the seats in the UK, and therefore just slips into our list of seats under review. Boris Johnson may also have a greater understanding of the student vote than other recent Conservative Prime Ministers because, unlike David Cameron and Theresa May, his constituency (Uxbridge) hosts a university (Brunel), where the Vice-Chancellor is also the serving President of Universities UK, and he is also a former Shadow Minister for Higher Education as well as a former Mayor of London, where participation in higher education is particularly high.

## *Methodology*

We use the 2011 Census to discern the number of students 'usually resident' in each parliamentary constituency.<sup>4</sup> This is the best and standard source for work on student voters at a constituency level.<sup>5</sup> But it is very far from perfect. In particular, the information:

- is a snapshot from the Census Day almost a decade ago (27 March 2011);
- relates to full-time students only;
- includes both UK voters and international students;
- includes students undertaking qualifications at any level of education; and
- is limited to those aged between 18 and 74.<sup>6</sup>

Other points about the research to note include:

- no seats in Northern Ireland fit our criteria of students making up over 17.5% of the population, but Northern Ireland results are included in any quoted UK figures;
- the election results were taken from Wikipedia in early September 2020 – a spreadsheet with all the results in one place is available at [www.hepi.ac.uk](http://www.hepi.ac.uk);
- term dates differ at higher education institutions, meaning a different proportion of students may be in residence on the same election day;
- while the assessment focuses on party totals, general elections are about electing individuals as MPs and some candidates may have particularly strong (or weak) personal votes;

- the research ignores the by-election that was held in one of the 25 seats (Manchester Central in 2012);
- there have been no boundary changes since the current boundaries were first used in 2010 so the 25 constituencies are, in terms of their geographical boundaries, directly comparable between elections;
- UKIP and the Brexit Party are treated together, even though they are separate entities – however, in only one contest in this study (Holborn and St Pancras in 2019) did the two parties stand against each other;
- some seats in the study witnessed electoral pacts between different parties – the Liberal Democrats did not contest Bristol West in 2019 (despite holding it with a big majority back in 2010), the Green Party did not contest Bath or Cardiff Central in 2019 and Plaid Cymru also stood aside in Cardiff Central;
- independent and fringe candidates are ignored, even when they were relatively high profile (such as the former MPs Mike Hancock, who stood as an Independent in Portsmouth South in 2015, and George Galloway, who stood as an Independent in Manchester Central in 2017); and
- candidates who stood on a joint Labour Party and Co-operative Party ticket are treated the same as other Labour MPs.

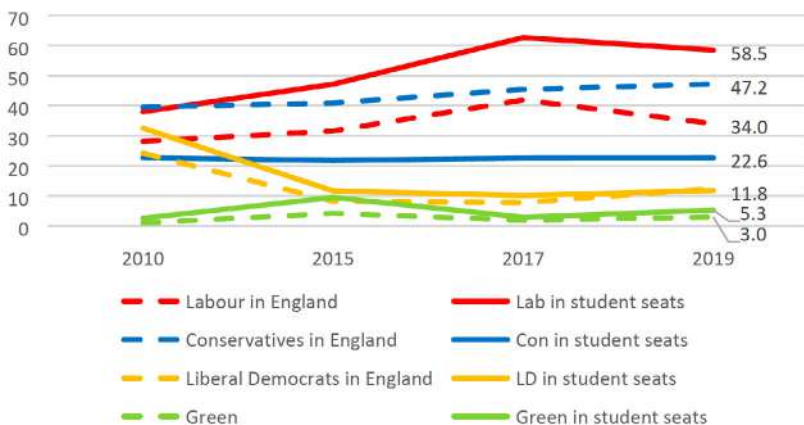
Election outcomes reflect numerous factors and the results in the 25 constituencies in this study may reflect the voting behaviour of other voters, including higher education staff and recent graduates, as well as students. However, polling by YouthSight before the 2019 election suggests full-time students were over three times more likely to vote Labour (53%) than Liberal Democrat (16%) or Conservative (15%).

## Analysis by country

### England

The chart below compares the performance of the three main political parties in England overall with their performance in the 20 English constituencies with the highest proportion of students. Overall, it shows that – in 2019 – Labour secured around 25 percentage points more of the vote share in student seats in England than they did in England as a whole (58.5% versus 34.0%), while the Conservatives secured around 25 percentage points less in student seats than they did in England as a whole (22.6% versus 47.2%).

Party performance in England and in top 20 English student seats



The chart also shows that Labour has consistently performed much better in student seats than in England as a whole and the gap between their performance overall and in student seats has grown at every recent election, rising from 9.9

percentage points in 2010, to 15.5 percentage points in 2015, 20.7 percentage points in 2017 and 24.5 percentage points in 2019.

Meanwhile, the Conservatives have performed consistently worse in student seats than they have in England as a whole. While their vote share in England has risen since by 7.7 percentage points 2010 (from 39.5% to 47.2%), their vote share in the most student-heavy seats has flatlined during the whole period (hovering between 21.8% and 22.7%). The gap between Conservative performance in student seats and England overall has grown from 16.8 percentage points in 2010, to 19.1 percentage points in 2015, to 22.8 percentage points in 2017 and 24.6 percentage points in 2019.

In these seats, the main action often seems to have swirled around the Conservative Party rather than directly involved them. For example, between 2010 and 2019, Leeds North West went from being a seemingly safe Liberal Democrat seat to a seemingly safe Labour seat; the Conservatives started in second place in 2010 with 26.6% of the vote and ended in second place in 2019 with 26.8% of the vote. They managed to capture Portsmouth South and Bath in 2015 thanks primarily to a big drop in Liberal Democrat support but lost these seats to the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats respectively just two years later.

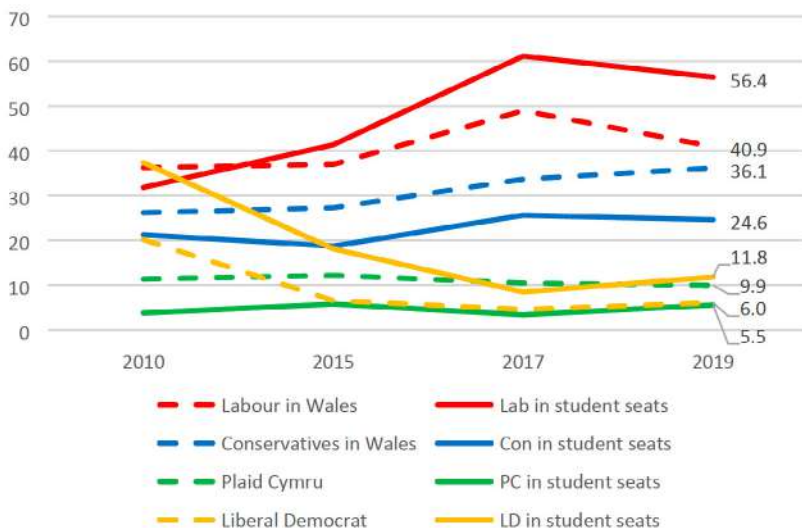
Although the Liberal Democrats in England did noticeably better in student seats than in England as a whole in 2010, the gap shrunk afterwards – they only performed marginally better in student seats than in England overall in 2015 and 2017 and actually did slightly worse in these seats (with a vote share of 11.8%) than in the whole of England (12.4%) in 2019.



## Wales

Although the Labour Party has won more votes than the Conservative Party in Wales at all recent general elections (unlike in England), the electoral pattern in Wales still has some things in common with the pattern in England (based on our small sample of just two seats). For example, Labour has tended to do considerably better in student areas than it has done in Wales as a whole, whereas the opposite has been true for the Conservatives.

### Party performance in Wales and in the top 2 Welsh student seats



Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats have tended to do better in student areas than in Wales as a whole and Plaid Cymru have done worse. Together, this suggests that the recent reforms to student finance implemented by the Welsh Government,

which is a Labour administration with a Liberal Democrat Minister for Education, may not have adversely affected their electoral performance in the way that the 2010 to 2012 reforms affected Liberal Democrat support in England.

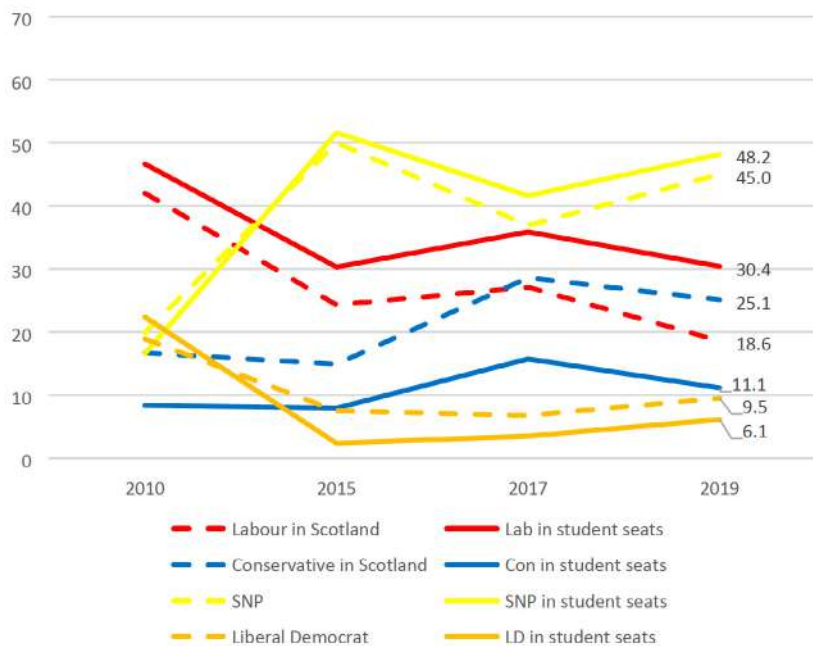
### *Scotland*

Labour held all three Scottish student seats in 2010 but have lost considerable support since. They did worse overall in Scotland than the Conservatives in 2017 and 2019, although they continued to beat the Conservatives easily in student seats. In Scotland as a whole, they were 6.5 percentage points behind the Conservatives (18.6% versus 25.1%); in student seats, they were 19.3 percentage points ahead (30.4% versus 11.1%). So the pattern in England and Wales of Labour doing better in student areas and the Conservatives worse is repeated in Scotland, although the gap between the UK's two biggest parties' performances in Scottish student seats has actually been reducing (from 38.2 percentage points in 2010, to 22.4 percentage points in 2015, 20.2 percentage points in 2017 and 19.3 percentage points in 2019).

Yet it is the SNP that has been the most popular party in the three Scottish student seats in this study at each of the last three general elections. In general terms, the SNP vote share in student seats has broadly tracked their overall popularity, although in 2015, 2017 and 2019 they did a little better in the three student seats than overall.

However, in terms of the share of the vote, the top-performing party, the SNP, does not do as well in Scottish student seats as the top-performing party, Labour, does in English and Welsh student seats. In the three Scottish student seats in 2019, the SNP's vote share was 48.2% but in student seats across England and Wales, on average Labour had a majority of votes (58.5% and 56.4% respectively).

## Party performance in Scotland and in the top 3 Scottish student seats



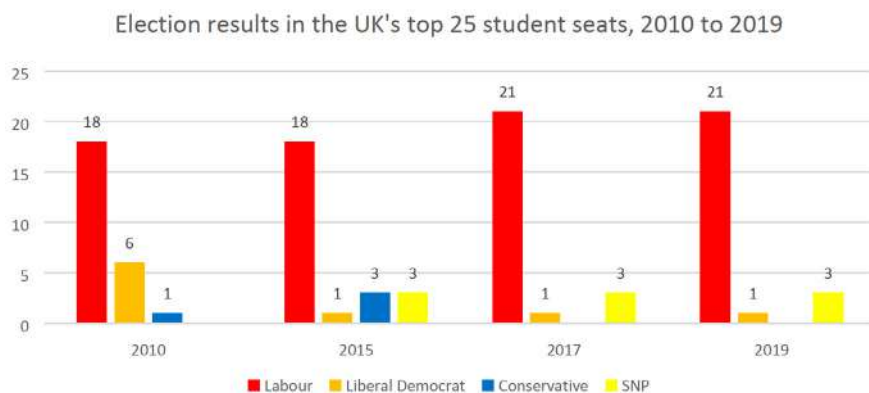


## Analysis by party

### Labour

All but one of the 20 seats in England with the highest proportion of students were won by Labour at the 2019 election, with the Liberal Democrats winning Bath, which is also the only student seat anywhere in the UK where Labour were not in the top two parties in 2017 and 2019.<sup>7</sup> Labour were also victorious in the two student seats in Wales with the highest proportion of full-time students, while the three seats in Scotland were all won by the SNP, with Labour in second place.

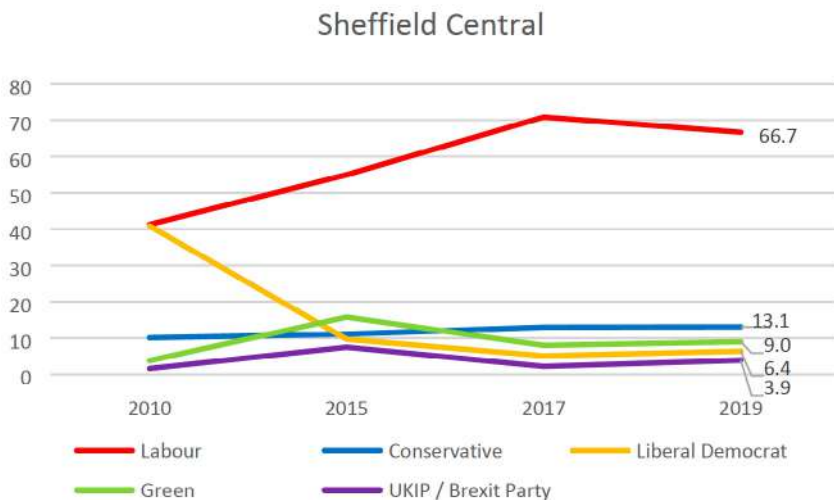
Of the potential maximum 100 election victories in the 25 student seats across the UK between 2010 and 2019, Labour have won 78 times.



The Labour share of the vote grew by 5.9 percentage points, from 28.1% to 34.0% between 2010 and 2019 in England as a whole but, within our 20 student seats in England, it grew over three times as fast, by 20.5 percentage points, from 38.0% to 58.5%. Labour's improved performance after 2010 was not a

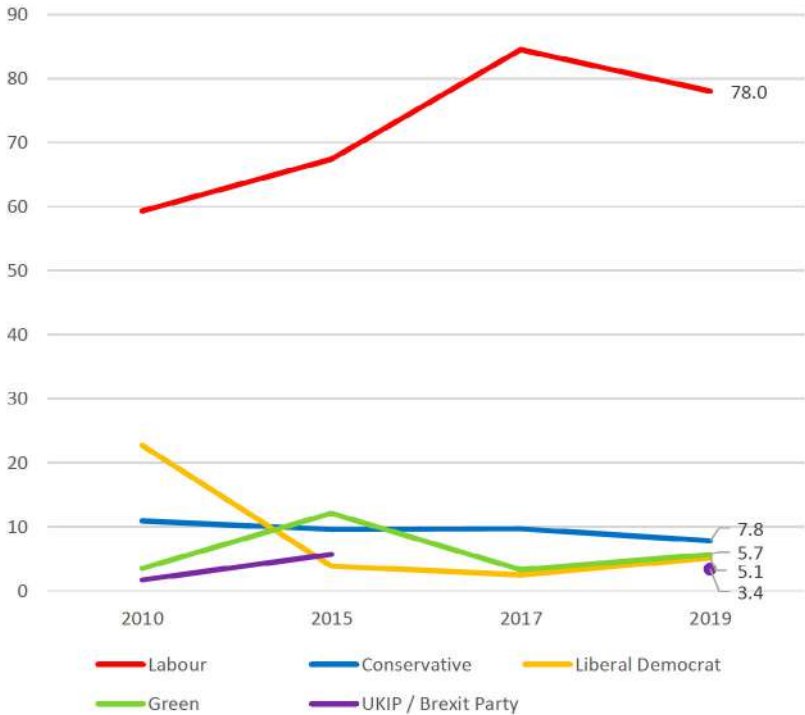
single gradual trend. In English student seats, the Labour share of the vote grew particularly fast between 2015 and 2017, from 47.1% to 62.6% (possibly as a result of a higher turnout among full-time students), before falling back somewhat afterwards.

These trends are evident in the results in Sheffield Central, which has a higher proportion of students than any other UK constituency.



In other words, in student-heavy seats, Jeremy Corbyn did better in his first general election as leader in 2017 than in his second in 2019, but even in 2019 he did better than Ed Miliband in 2015, who in turn did better than Gordon Brown in 2010. Even in 2019, however, Labour enjoyed an average majority of 36.9% in the 21 out of the 25 UK student seats they won in 2019 (ranging from 0.9% in Coventry South to 70.2% and 37,043 votes in Liverpool Riverside, as shown below).

## Liverpool Riverside

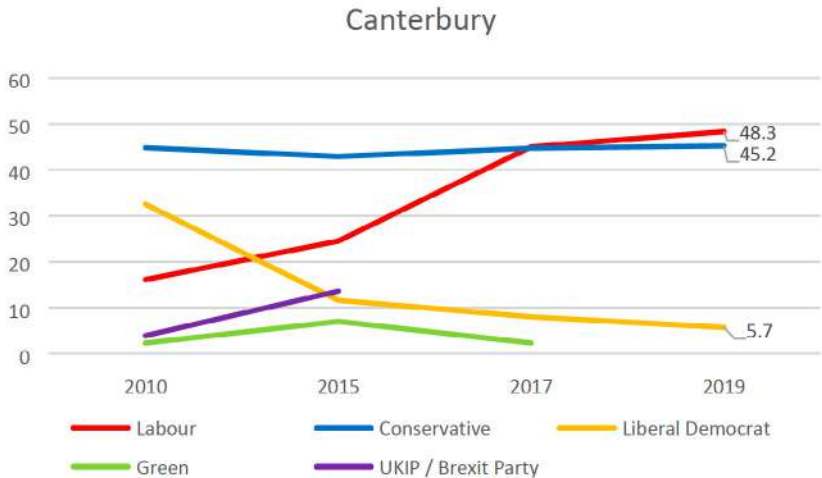


This pattern of Labour votes in student seats – rising in 2015 and 2017 but falling back somewhat in 2019 – replicates the pattern in Labour Party’s overall share of the vote in England. However, HEPI’s analysis just after the 2019 general election confirmed constituencies with a higher proportion of students had a *lower* Labour-to-Conservative swing than the UK-wide 4.6% pro-Conservative swing.<sup>8</sup>

Research by the House of Commons Library comparing 77 seats with a high number of students to the picture for Great Britain as a whole similarly confirms the Labour vote share fell less in student seats than overall.<sup>9</sup>

## Conservatives

The Conservatives came second in 18 of the 20 English seats in 2019 but were third in Cambridge and Bristol West. Back in 2010, they were the runner up in seven of these seats (including Cambridge), although they also held one (Canterbury).



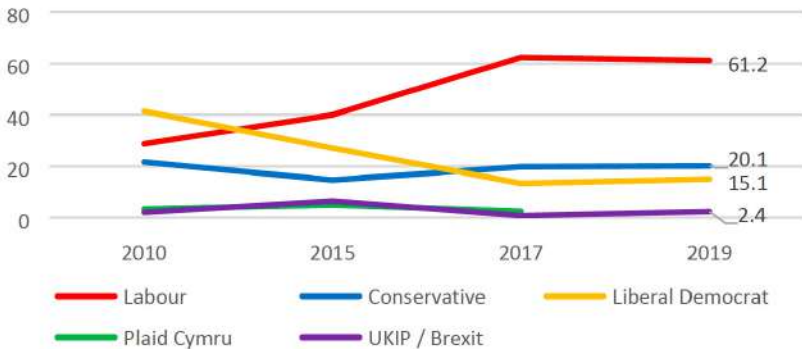
In the two student seats in Wales, the Conservatives came second in 2019, whereas they had been third in both back in 2010, as shown in the Cardiff Central results below, but they remained some distance behind the Labour Party.

In Scotland, the Conservatives came fourth in all three of the student seats in 2010 but were third in all three student seats in 2015, 2017 and 2019.

So, relative to the other major political parties, Conservatives might be said to have done somewhat better in student seats after 2010.



## Cardiff Central

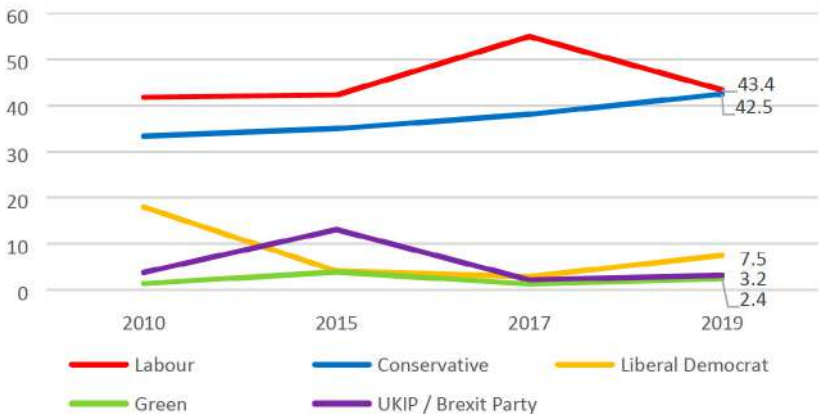


Yet, although the Conservatives could be said to have performed somewhat better relative to other parties over time in student seats, in overall terms there have not been dramatic changes in the Conservatives' share of the vote in student seats since 2010.

There have been changes in individual seats, however. In half the student seats in England, the Conservative share of the vote declined between 2010 and 2019 (by as much as 10.1 percentage points in Cambridge) and in the other half it went up.

Only in two seats did the Conservative share of the vote grow by more than the average over England as a whole (9.1 percentage points in Coventry South and 8.4 percentage points in Newcastle upon Tyne East). Even though the Conservatives failed to win Canterbury back in 2019, their vote share in the constituency (45.2%) was actually higher than it had been when they won the seat in 2010 (44.8%) and 2015 (42.9%).

## Coventry South



Overall, of the potential maximum 100 election victories in the 25 student seats across the UK between 2010 and 2019, the Conservatives have won just four times – twice in Canterbury, once in Portsmouth South (which is the only one of the 25 seats in the study to have been represented by three different parties between 2010 and 2019) and once in Bath. Since losing these three seats in 2017, the Conservatives have not won a single one of the 25 student seats in the UK.

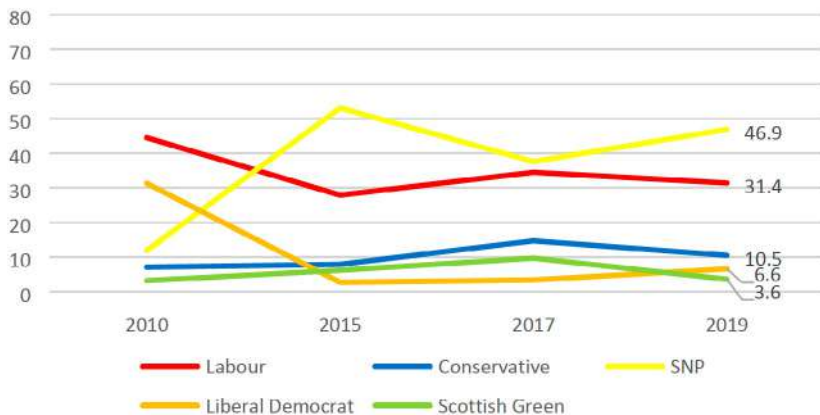
### *Liberal Democrats*

In some ways, the most dramatic trend in the data for the 20 English seats with the greatest proportion of students is the decline of the Liberal Democrats, albeit with a slight recovery in 2019. In 2010, their average vote share in these seats was 32.5%; in 2015, it was 11.7%; in 2017, it fell to 10.1%; and in 2019, it grew slightly to 11.8% (but fell below their overall vote share in England).

In 2010, the Liberal Democrats had won five out of the 20 English student seats; in each of the three elections since, they have won just one.

A squeeze of the Liberal Democrat vote is also evident in the two Welsh seats and three Scottish seats. In Cardiff Central, they went from winning the seat in 2010 to third place by 2017 and in Swansea West, they went from a close second place in 2010 to fourth place by 2017, although in both seats their vote recovered slightly in 2019. In Glasgow Central, the Liberal Democrat vote share in 2015 (1.6%) was just 10% of the figure in 2010 (16.4%) and it was still only 4.9% in 2019; in Glasgow North, they were a good second in 2010 but a poor fifth in 2015 and 2017, as shown below.

Glasgow North



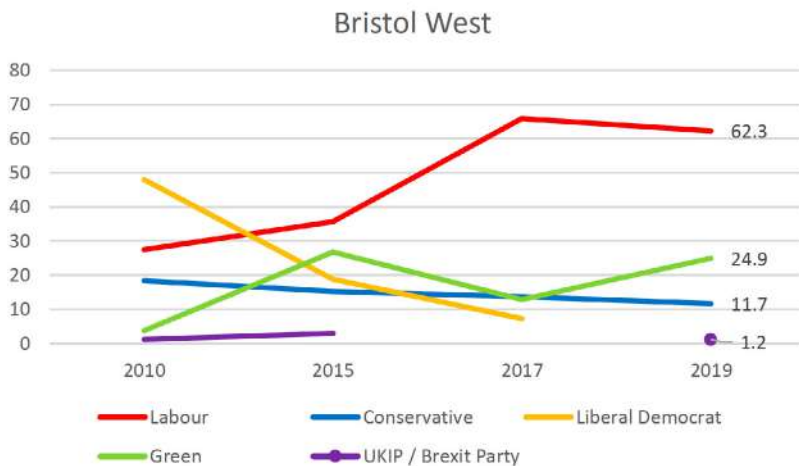
Of the potential maximum 100 election victories in the 25 student seats across the UK between 2010 and 2019, the Liberal Democrats have won nine times but two-thirds of these victories were in the single election of 2010.

Given polling in late 2019 suggested an overwhelming majority of students wanted the UK to remain in the European Union and that Brexit could affect how a majority of students would vote in a general election, the Liberal Democrats might

reasonably have expected to fare better than they did in student seats.<sup>10</sup> However, their membership of the Coalition Government of 2010 and 2015, including their role in raising tuition fees, was a factor in the campaign.<sup>11</sup>

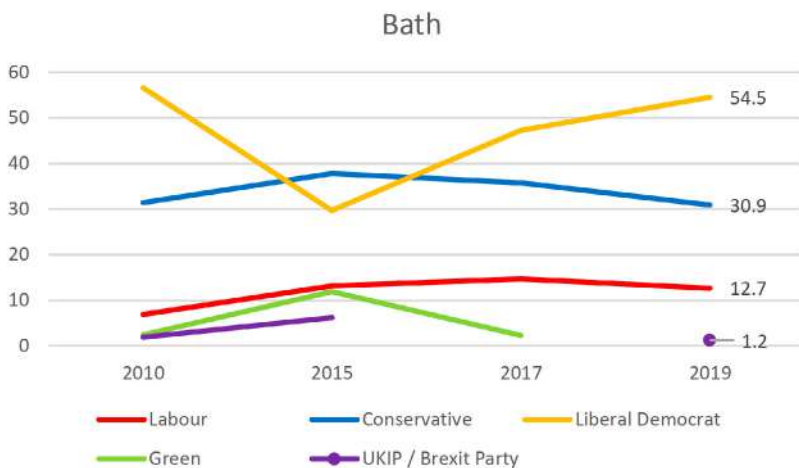
### *Minor parties*

It is often claimed the Green Party enjoy considerable support among students and higher education staff. They have tended to do somewhat better in student seats than other seats. But in the 20 English seats with the most students, they have generally come nowhere near winning and have typically come fourth or fifth – although they did notably better in English student seats in 2015 (with 9.5% of the vote) than in the other three elections. Their performance in the two Welsh seats and the three Scottish seats was similarly poor.



One obvious exception to the general poor performance of the Green Party is Bristol West constituency, where they came second in 2015, a close third in 2017 and second again in 2019 – although on the final occasion the Liberal Democrats agreed

not to contest the seat as part of an electoral pact. The Greens also came second in Sheffield Central and Manchester Gorton in 2015, but were nowhere near winning with just 15.8% and 9.8% of the vote respectively, and they may have been decisive in the Liberal Democrats losing Bath between 2015 and 2017.



Overall, the Green Party’s candidates in these 20 English seats have not done noticeably better than those of UKIP / the Brexit Party, who struggled to win support among students. The Green Party has also fared poorly in student seats in Wales and Scotland, not once appearing in the top three in any of the five seats included in this study between 2010 and 2019 (and they came seventh in Swansea West in 2010).<sup>12</sup>

If it is true that the Green Party enjoys considerable support among students, then it is possible that their vote share has been squeezed at general elections as a result of the first-past-the-post electoral system encouraging students to vote tactically when helping to choose a future government.



## Conclusions

Recent cohorts of students have shown a strong preference for Labour.<sup>13</sup> At recent elections, Labour have stacked up votes in many of the seats in which students are most concentrated. After the 2017 election, it was claimed that Labour had lost the election for want of just another couple of thousand votes in the most marginal seats.<sup>14</sup> Yet in many student-heavy seats, Labour have recently stacked up majorities of well over 20,000.

When Boris Johnson fixed the last election to take place on 12 December 2019, it was widely claimed that university term dates would mean many students would not vote at their place of study and that this would unfairly benefit the Conservatives. The *New Statesman* described ‘a particularly ineradicable meme that the reason why the election date matters is because it will change whether the election falls in term time.’<sup>15</sup>

In fact, many universities had not finished by the day of the election and, in some respects, it might have favoured the Labour Opposition more if they had. In the most student-heavy seats, student votes seem merely to have increased Labour’s majorities. Three of the top 10 safest seats in the UK are also in our list of 25 seats with the highest proportion of students: in Liverpool Riverside in 2019, Labour scored 70.1% of the vote, in Manchester Gorton, they scored 68.1% and in Birmingham Ladywood, they scored 67.9%. (However, it is important to remember that some students have just one place of residence – 5,000 full-time undergraduates at the University of Glasgow, for example, live in the parental home during term.)

There are other seats, however, where students may well have been decisive in taking and then holding the seat for Labour in 2017 and 2019 – for example, Canterbury, which had previously had Conservative representation for almost

two centuries, and Leeds North West, which had been Liberal Democrat since 2005. In Coventry South, which Labour has represented since 1964 but where Labour's margin of victory over the Conservatives was squeezed to just 401 votes in 2019 (making it the 12th most marginal seat in the UK), students are likely to have helped ensure the seat did not in fact change hands.

After the 2019 election, the defeated Conservative candidate in Canterbury ascribed her loss to students' voting behaviour and called for the rules to be overturned so that students would only be able to vote 'at their permanent home and not at their university address.'<sup>16</sup> However, Dr Dean Machin of Portsmouth University criticised this idea for its 'appalling cynicism'.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the huge majorities that Labour has accrued in seats with a high concentration of students, the support of students cannot be taken for granted. There were periods in the 2000s when Labour polled third among students and, within living memory, all three major UK-wide parties have led polling among students.<sup>18</sup> Students themselves change, as people graduate and new students enrol, and the preferences of the student body change over time. This will be a consideration as all three major political parties continue to reassess their policies on higher education and young people.

There may not be another general election until 2024 and all three main parties could change their attitudes towards so-called 'student issues' between now and then. We are waiting for a response to the Augar report, produced originally for Theresa May's Government, and both Labour and the Liberal Democrats have recently elected new leaders who are likely to review many of their policies. Meanwhile, given the funding problems faced by universities, there may conceivably be greater pressures on the no-fees policy in Scotland.<sup>19</sup>



As this policy review process continues, democratic politicians chasing votes will recall that, while students obviously care deeply about issues like student finance, they also care about bigger issues that affect the whole of society, like climate change, the NHS and the state of the labour market, as well as the UK's relationships with the rest of the world, including the European Union.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the salience of student issues to the electorate as a whole has probably been exaggerated: at five of the last six general elections (2001, 2005, 2015, 2017 and 2019), the party promising to abolish or reduce tuition fees has lost (Conservatives in 2001 and 2005 and Labour in 2015, 2017 and 2019) and the party more committed to fees has won.<sup>21</sup>

It seems likely that, while the electoral importance of student issues is sometimes exaggerated, the student vote still cannot be taken for granted and will continue to make a difference in some key seats. Indeed, if higher education continues on its long-term trajectory of welcoming more full-time students, undergraduate and postgraduate, the concept of an identifiable student vote could conceivably grow further.

Finally, there are well-publicised concerns that the process of attending university can alter students' political viewpoints, in particular by pushing them to the left of the political spectrum.<sup>22</sup> This claim is sometimes regarded as one cause of scepticism about continued growth of higher education on the right of the political spectrum. Yet while most UK students and higher education staff do seem to gravitate towards left-of-centre parties when deciding how to vote, academic evidence suggests attending higher education may determine your future political outlook less than is often supposed.<sup>23</sup>

## Annex: Election results in student seats

### England

Constituency	Students (%)	2010 winning vote (%)	2015 winning vote (%)	2017 winning vote (%)	2019 winning vote (%)
Sheffield Central	34.8	41.3	55.0	70.9	66.7
Nottingham South	29.9	37.3	47.6	62.4	55.2
Newcastle upon Tyne East	27.6	45.0	49.4	67.6	60.1
Liverpool, Riverside	27.6	59.3	67.4	84.5	78.0
Manchester Central	26.0	52.7	61.3	77.4	70.4
Leeds North West	24.2	47.5	36.8	44.1	48.6
Oxford East	24.0	42.5	50.0	65.2	57.0
Cambridge	23.6	39.1	36.0	51.9	48.0
Manchester, Gorton	22.5	50.1	67.1	76.3	77.6
Leeds Central	21.6	49.3	55.0	70.2	61.7
Bristol West	21.6	48.0	35.7	65.9	62.3
Portsmouth South	20.5	45.9	34.8	41.0	48.6
Leicester South	20.4	45.6	59.8	73.6	67.0
Coventry South	19.8	41.8	42.3	55.0	43.4
Birmingham, Ladywood	19.4	55.7	73.6	82.7	79.2
Canterbury	19.0	44.8	42.9	45.0	48.3
Bath	18.0	56.6	37.8	47.3	54.5
Nottingham East	17.9	45.4	54.6	71.5	64.3
Birmingham, Selly Oak	17.8	38.5	47.7	62.9	56.0
Holborn and St Pancras	17.6	46.1	52.9	70.1	64.5

## Wales

<b>Constituency</b>	<b>Students (%)</b>	<b>2010 Winning vote (%)</b>	<b>2015 winning vote (%)</b>	<b>2017 winning vote (%)</b>	<b>2019 winning vote (%)</b>
Cardiff Central	30.1	41.4	40.0	62.4	61.2
Swansea West	20.1	34.7	42.6	59.8	51.6

## Scotland

<b>Constituency</b>	<b>Students (%)</b>	<b>2010 winning vote (%)</b>	<b>2015 winning vote (%)</b>	<b>2017 winning vote (%)</b>	<b>2019 winning vote (%)</b>
Glasgow Central	22.5	52.0	52.5	44.7	49.2
Glasgow North	22.0	44.5	53.1	37.6	46.9
Edinburgh East	19.9	43.4	49.2	42.5	48.4



## Endnotes

1 See, for example, 'The Youthquake Debate' in James Sloam and Matt Henn, *Youthquake 2017: The Rise of Young Cosmopolitans in Britain* (2019), pp.108-110

2 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Do-students-swing-elections.pdf>; <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Students-and-the-2015-general-election.pdf>

3 For example, given students are more likely to vote Labour and that constituencies with the most students tend to be represented by Labour, there will have been instances where students have increased a Labour MP's majority by voting at their term-time address while missing out on the chance to have their voice heard more clearly by voting in a marginal seat at their vacation address.

4 <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/census/2011/ks501uk>

5 It is the source, for example, of lists like that provided in Iain Dale, Greg Callis, Daniel Hamilton and Robert Waller (eds), *The Politicos Guide to the 2015 General Election* (2014), p.234

6 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/Economic-benefits-of-international-students-by-constituency-Final-11-01-2018.pdf>

7 The Green Party did not stand in Bath in 2019 as part of an electoral pact, though given their modest support in the constituency in 2017 and the hefty size of the Liberal Democrat majority, this is unlikely to have made much difference to the outcome.

8 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2019/12/18/so-did-students-have-any-impact-on-the-election/>

9 <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/parliament-and-elections/elections-elections/general-election-2019-voting-patterns-in-student-seats/>

10 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2019/11/07/will-students-vote-tactically-over-brexit-what-does-the-latest-polling-tell-us/>

- 11 See, for example, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/general-election-liberal-democrats-betrayed-students-tuition-fees-labour-a9238786.html>
- 12 The Green Party did not stand a candidate in Edinburgh East in 2017. In Cardiff Central in 2019, they were part of an electoral pact that also meant they did not put up a candidate.
- 13 <https://www.youthsight.com/blog/pre-election-student-vote>
- 14 <https://www.businessinsider.com/how-jeremy-corbyn-might-become-prime-minister-2017-11?r=US&IR=T>; <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/corbyn-election-results-votes-away-prime-minister-theresa-may-hung-parliament-a7782581.html>
- 15 <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/education/2019/10/no-election-date-wont-mean-students-cant-vote>
- 16 <https://www.conservativehome.com/platform/2020/01/anna-firth-we-won-the-election-but-lost-the-university-seats-we-must-not-lose-these-voters-for-a-generation.html>
- 17 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2020/02/05/disenfranchising-the-student-vote-and-other-absurd-ideas/>
- 18 <https://www.youthsight.com/blog/the-student-vote-october-2019>
- 19 <https://www.thescottishsun.co.uk/news/5735399/scotland-university-students-pay-tuition-fees-benny-higgins/>
- 20 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/2019-ELECTION-BRIEFING.pdf>
- 21 On the other occasion, in 2010, neither major party had a clear policy as they were waiting for the Browne report. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13619462.2013.783418>
- 22 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-50221335>
- 23 <https://theconversation.com/does-college-turn-people-into-liberals-90905>

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This short report looks more deeply into the question of whether student voters make a difference to UK election results by:

- taking the 25 constituencies with the highest proportion of full-time students – those where they are thought to make up more than 17.5 per cent of the electorate;
- considering the results in these seats for the last four general elections, in 2010, 2015, 2017 and 2019; and
- comparing the results in these seats to the bigger picture.

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

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