



Higher Education Policy Institute

Where will students hold the balance of power in the 2024 General Election?



national union of **students**

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Foreword

As the rain dried on the Downing Street lectern after the Prime Minister's surprise election announcement, one question flew around students' unions and the higher education sector: how do we get out the student vote ... in July?

As this report notes, the student vote has historically been concentrated in major university towns and cities. General elections are usually called at times when most students are on campus or have a fixed address from which to vote by post. An early July election date caused initial concern: most undergraduates living away from home would have moved, or be in the process of moving, and Commonwealth students with voting rights could be headed out of the country.

By contrast, this report shows 2024 could be the year where the student vote is more powerful than ever. Students who live away from home in term-time could pour out of safe Labour university seats and into traditionally Conservative safe seats in the South East. As the political mood in the UK changes and fewer Conservative seats seem secure, students could make a real, long-lasting difference to the electoral outcomes of the country, however they vote.

At NUS UK, we have been preparing for this election over the last two years. We launched the Manifesto for our Future in January, based on the aspirations of 10,000 students.¹ Since the general election was called, we have reached over 4 million students to ask them to register to vote, and we have given away almost 20,000 free voter IDs to help prevent any young person from being disenfranchised. Students' unions across the UK are working flat-out to reach postgraduate students, college students and commuter students who are still at their term-time addresses and calling every single student who has moved away.

NUS UK's regular polling shows that, nationally, 87% of students report that they intend to vote. The myth of the student or young person entirely disengaged from national politics remains a myth. When students are left with 50p to live off after rent and bills, it is no wonder we are crying out for change.²

However, all of this relies on whether political parties can find a way to convince us to vote. We need to see long-lasting, systemic change which will completely alter the downward trajectory of the country. We need to reform student funding, provide proper financial support and make sure every student can access affordable accommodation. If politicians are willing to make these arguments and establish these policies, they can properly secure young peoples' futures.

Students are not staying behind at this election. The choice now rests with political leaders on whether they value our votes or not.

Chloe Field

Chloe Field, Vice President for Higher Education, NUS UK

Executive Summary

Using data from the 2021 Census, we model the potential impact of student voters in the 2024 General Election in England and Wales. We compare the number of students recorded to live in each constituency with the size of the 2019 majority (the difference between the votes won by the first and second place candidates) had the election used the 2024 constituency boundaries. We also compare the number of student voters with the projected majority in a recent large seat-by-seat poll by YouGov. We find the following:

- There are 75 seats where the number of students exceeds the 2019 majority, including the seat of Cabinet minister Steve Baker and the seat of former Conservative Party leader Iain Duncan Smith. A majority of these are currently held by Labour.
- There are 53 seats where the number of students exceeds the projected majority according to the June 2024 YouGov poll. Of these, YouGov records 50 of these as 'tossups' meaning they are too close to call.
- Of these 53, 51 were won by the Conservatives in 2019. Many are in so-called 'Blue Wall' seats in the South East, South West and East of England and include Surrey Heath, the former seat of Cabinet minister Michael Gove.
- These results assume students will vote at their term-time address. But most will vote at their home address for two reasons: a) the election will take place during the summer holidays and b) most students are only registered at their home address.
- As a result, we also looked at where students will come home to after term ends. We find 35 constituencies where the number of returning students exceeds the majority projected by YouGov – all of which were held by the Conservatives in 2019. This suggests returning students could turn the tide in some constituencies.
- All these factors make the impact of the student vote highly unpredictable. However, as some students disperse from typically safe Labour-held cities into newly marginal rural constituencies, the Labour Party is likely to be the main beneficiary to the detriment of the Conservatives.

Introduction

On Thursday 4 July 2024, the UK will vote in its first general election since 2019. There are more than two million UK-domiciled students in higher education and many more in other forms of education, most of whom will be eligible to vote. This means the student vote may have a significant effect on the outcome.

Analysis by YouGov suggests that in 2019, Labour was by far the most popular party among students. Some 56% of students voted Labour, while only 17% voted for the Conservatives and 14% for the Liberal Democrats.³

Student voting patterns (2019) and intentions (2023/24)

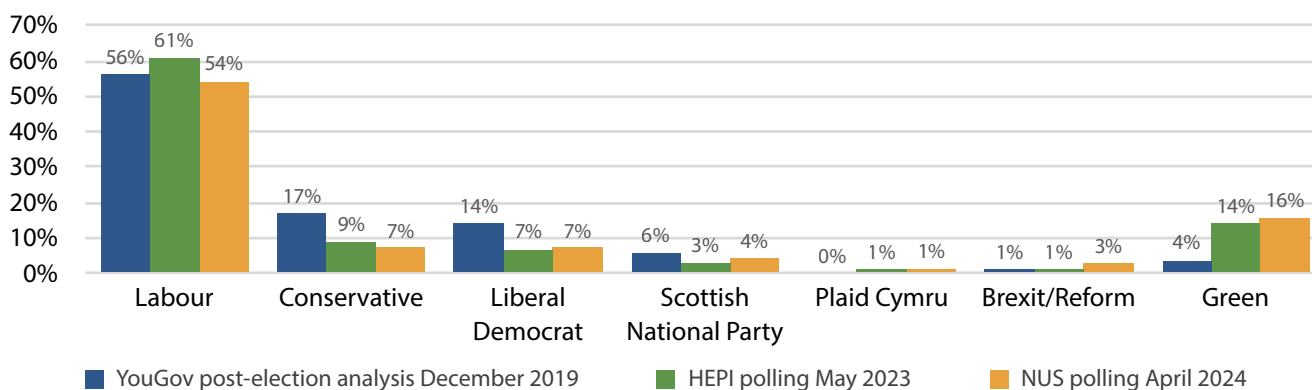


Figure 1 As a proportion of all students who voted (2019) or students who knew who they would vote for (2023/24). The Brexit Party, which stood in 2019, rebranded to the Reform Party ahead of the 2024 election. Source: YouGov (2019), HEPI (2023) and the National Union of Students (2024). Those who chose another party are excluded, so percentages may not sum to 100%.

More recent polling conducted by HEPI in May 2023 and the National Union of Students (NUS) in April 2024 suggests support for Labour is at comparable levels. However, support for the Conservatives and

Liberal Democrats has decreased, while the Green Party has become much more popular, polling as high as 16% among students that have decided who they will vote for.⁴

However, these results may change significantly. In both the HEPI and NUS polling, significant numbers, 24% and 30% respectively, had not made up their minds on how to vote.

Methods

This research is based on data for England and Wales from the 2021 Census. We use two datasets in this report:

1. Constituency-level data on the number of students who have their **main address** there;
2. Constituency-level data on the number of students who have their **home address** there, but who live away from home during term-time.⁵

Students' main address will be their term-time address, if they have one, which will be the case for the majority of students.⁶ For the rest, their main address is their home address. Therefore, dataset one includes everyone, regardless of where they live during term-time, while dataset two includes only those students who live away from home during term-time.

Included in dataset one are full-time students (that is, anyone in full-time education) aged 18 or over and born in the UK. Students born overseas but eligible to vote in UK elections, such as those from Commonwealth countries or Ireland, are excluded, which may underestimate students' impact.

Dataset two is less detailed and indicates the number of students living away from their home address, up to 'three or more'. In these cases, we assume exactly three students are away, but in many cases the number of students will be higher, so these results may also underestimate the true number. However, it may also include some extra, as the data include under-18s boarding full-time at school.

We then compare these datasets to the following:

1. A projection by Rallings and Thrasher of the 2019 election had it occurred under the new 2024 constituency boundaries, to make it comparable with the 2024 election held with these boundaries; and
2. A major MRP [constituency-level] poll conducted by YouGov in early June 2024 as an indication of which constituencies will be most closely contested in 2024.⁷

Marginal constituencies, based on 2019 results

We begin with dataset one (students' main addresses) and compare this to the 2019 election results.

The constituencies with the most students registered are, unsurprisingly, in cities with several major universities such as Leeds, Sheffield and Nottingham. All of the top 10 constituencies for number of students, and all but two of the top 20, are currently held by Labour (the exceptions are Bath, held by the Liberal Democrats, and Lincoln, by the Conservatives).

Constituency	UK-born students	Region
Leeds Central and Headingley	30,482	Yorkshire and the Humber
Nottingham South	21,857	East Midlands
Sheffield Central	19,864	Yorkshire and the Humber
Manchester Rusholme	19,035	North West England
Liverpool Riverside	18,614	North West England
Bristol Central	17,326	South West England
Nottingham East	16,757	East Midlands
York Central	15,784	Yorkshire and the Humber
Cambridge	14,964	East of England
Exeter	14,862	South West England

Table 1 2024 constituencies with the largest number of UK-born students.

We find that there are 75 constituencies where the number of students exceeds the winning majority. These include:

- The constituency of one Cabinet minister, Steve Baker (Wycombe);
- Chingford and Woodford Green, the constituency of former Conservative Party leader Iain Duncan Smith, and Uxbridge and South Ruislip, which was until 2023 the constituency of former Conservative Party leader Boris Johnson;
- Warwick and Leamington, the constituency of Shadow Higher Education Minister Matt Western; and
- Bristol Central, where the Green Party is mounting a strong challenge to the Labour MP and member of the Shadow Cabinet, Thangam Debbonaire who won the mostly coextensive and now abolished seat of Bristol West in 2019.

These constituencies are spread across the UK. Many are in historically Labour areas where the Conservative Party made gains in 2019, such as Yorkshire and the North West of England.

Where students hold the balance of power

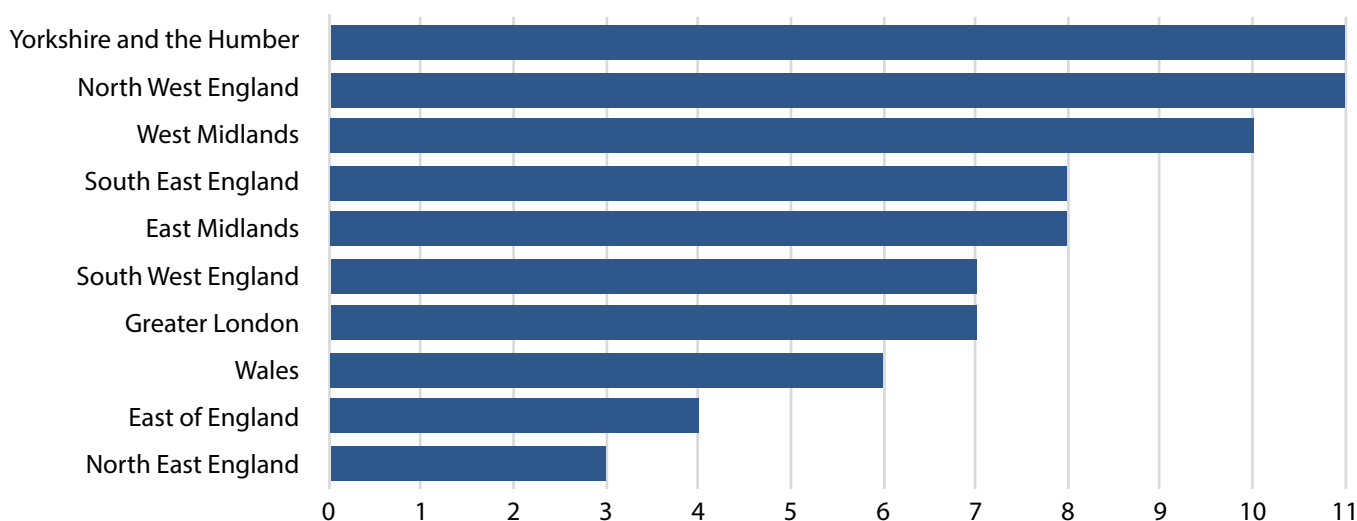


Figure 2 Constituencies where the number of students exceeds the majority, by region.

Of these 75 seats, 41 were held by Labour in 2019, 31 by the Conservatives, two by the Liberal Democrats and one (Ceredigion Preseli, a new constituency in 2024) would have been taken by Plaid Cymru had it existed at the time.

Winner 2019 (2024 boundaries)

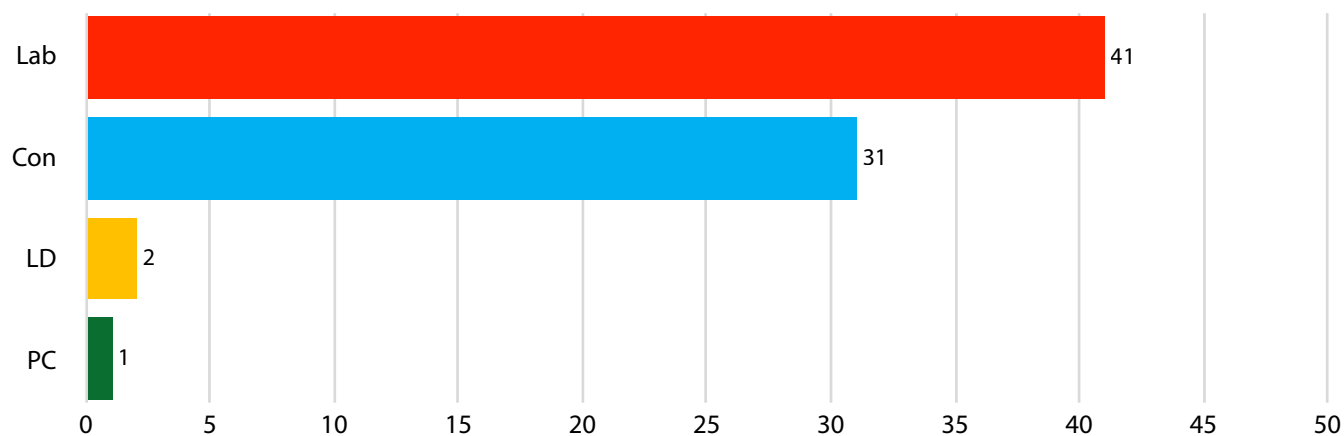


Figure 3 Who currently holds the constituencies where the number of students exceeds the majority.

In these constituencies, the overwhelming runner up was the Conservative Party (41 constituencies), then Labour (25), with the Liberal Democrats the runner up in eight and the Green Party in one, Bristol Central. So the pivotal constituencies are typically Conservative / Labour marginals.

Runner up 2019 (2024 boundaries)

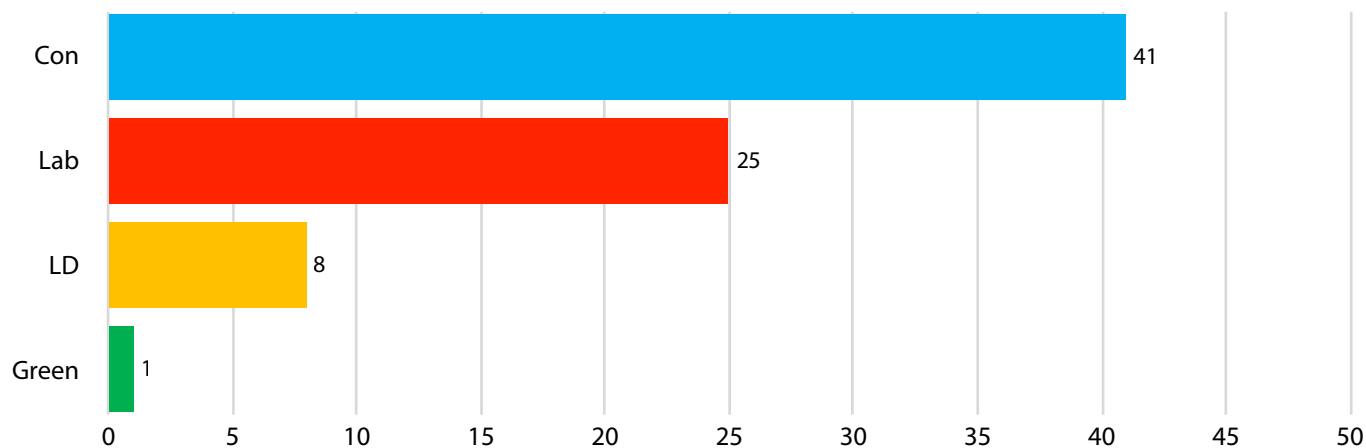


Figure 4 Current runner-up in constituencies where the number of students exceeds the majority.

These results suggest that the largely Labour student vote would, under 2024 boundaries, have helped Labour cling on in a number of marginal seats in 2019.

Where students may be decisive, 2024 projections

However, the electoral map is likely to look very different in 2024. In 2019, the Conservative Party won around 44% of the overall vote and Labour just 32%. Recent polling averages suggest Labour is now polling around 45% and the Conservatives around 23%.⁸ As a result, many seats which were marginal in 2019 are unlikely to be so, while seats which were previously safely Conservative may now be marginal.

Where are the 'new marginals' – the seats likely to be closely-fought in 2024 – and where will the student vote be decisive? We now compare the data on students' main addresses to the constituency-level YouGov poll from early June. That poll found that Labour is on track for a large majority, but found 131 'tossups', seats where the majority is less than 5% and which are therefore too close to call. The vast majority of these (112) were won by the Conservatives in 2019 and the rest-but-one (18) by the Scottish National Party (SNP).

We find 53 seats in England and Wales where the number of students exceeds the projected majority: that is, where the student vote could be decisive if students vote as a bloc. Of these, 18 are projected to be won by Labour, 27 by the Conservatives, six by the Liberal Democrats and two by the Greens. Of these 53, 50 are 'tossups', so small changes in voting patterns could change the result.

Unlike in 2019, the tightly-fought seats will be in historic Conservative territory: 51 of the 53 seats were won by the Conservatives in 2019. In 2024, the Conservatives are still projected to win around half of them (27) with Labour ahead in 18 and the Lib Dems in 6.

Projected winner in seats where students hold the balance of power

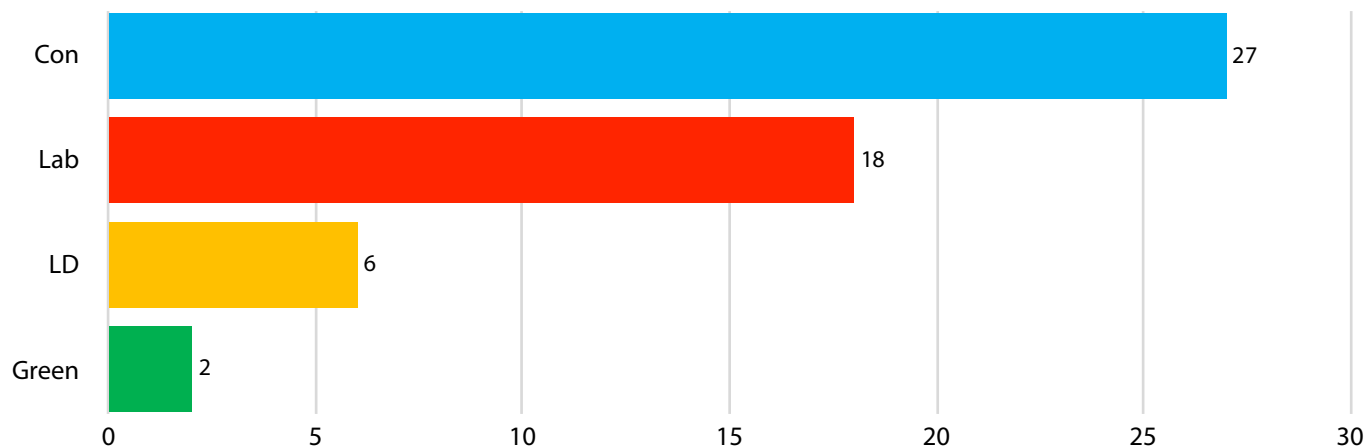


Figure 5 Who is projected to win the 53 constituencies where the number of students exceeds the majority.

We can see above that with voting along 2019 lines, the contested seats were widely spread across England. By contrast, in 2024, they are likely to be in Conservative heartlands. Three-fifths of the seats with a decisive student vote are in the South East, South West and East of England, in constituencies such as Mid Sussex, Surrey Heath, West Suffolk and South Dorset.

Where students are projected to be decisive

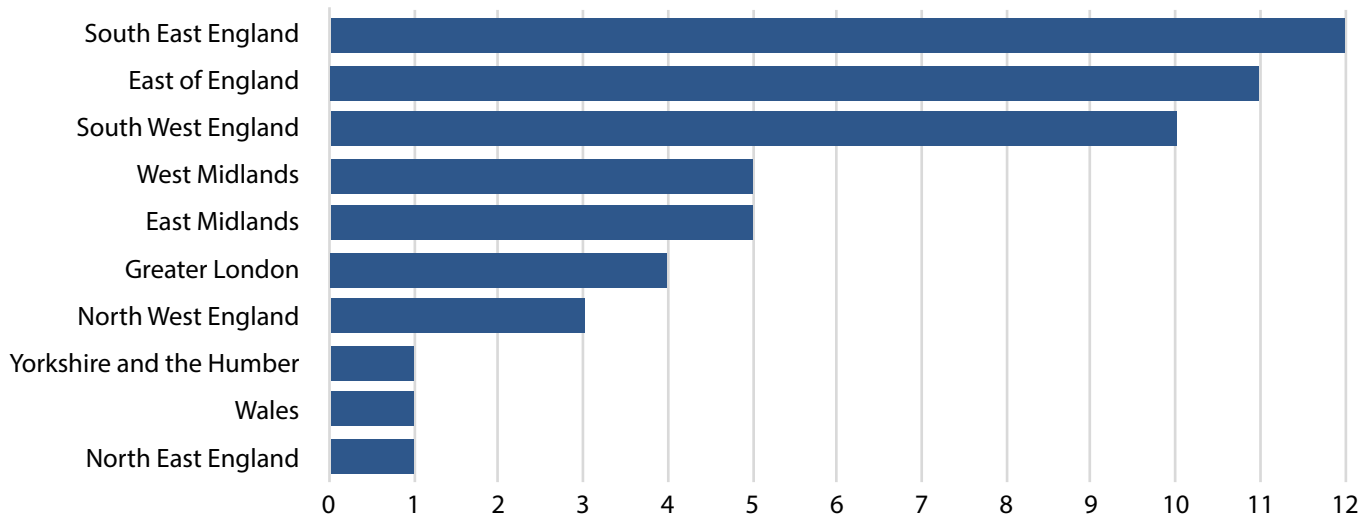


Figure 6 Constituencies where the number of students is projected to exceed the majority, by region.

The two not won by the Conservatives in 2019 are Brighton Pavilion and Bristol Central, which are both projected to be battles between Labour and the Green Party. The YouGov poll has the Green Party winning both by upwards of 10 percentage points.

As a result, the following may be true:

- Convincing students to vote, and vote Labour, in historic Conservative constituencies may be the difference for Labour between winning and losing these constituencies. Nationally, it may be the difference between a moderate and a large Labour majority;
- By winning a substantial portion of the student vote, the Liberal Democrats could close the gap on the Conservatives in many close seats, and likewise, with better-than-expected support, the Conservatives could hold more of these; and
- Student votes could make a significant difference in the two seats projected to be won by the Greens, Bristol Central and Brighton Pavilion, which both have substantial student populations.

One important caveat is that as similar numbers of students are projected to vote Labour in 2024 as in 2019, they may not in practice change the outcome in many places. While they may have contributed to 'saving' Labour MPs in marginal constituencies in 2019, their votes are already 'banked' by Labour and they will not be available to help Labour close the gap with the Conservatives in 2024. (Though of course if Labour lost some of these votes, closing the gap would be harder.)

The student vote: 'dispersed'?

The election will take place on 4 July. For most students, this will be early in the summer holidays. Those students who live away from home during term may have returned by the time the election is called. Also, more students are registered to vote at their home address than their term-time address (where they are different).⁹ Therefore, in 2024, students may be more likely to vote at their home than term-time address.

The return of students to their home address for an election is unusual. All elections in recent times have taken place during term-time for most students, with the partial exception of 2019: the election was held on 12 December, after term had finished at some institutions but not others. Rather than being concentrated in areas with high student populations, particularly cities, students will be more widely dispersed across the country. If they vote in person, rather than by proxy or postal vote, they are likely to do so at home.

This could have two effects. On the one hand, being ‘dispersed’, they are unlikely to be a major voting bloc in many constituencies, reducing their voting power. Net losers of students will be cities with multiple universities like Sheffield, Leeds and Nottingham. However, these areas are projected to have large or even overwhelming majorities, usually for Labour, and so are unlikely to change hands even if many students leave.

On the other hand, students may be more likely to return to formerly safe Conservative seats where Labour is expected to make inroads. Rural areas with no nearby university are likely to be the net recipients. Bolstered by an influx of returning students, constituencies like Mid Sussex, Surrey Heath (formerly held by Cabinet minister Michael Gove), West Suffolk and Tatton (which in 2024 will be contested again by Cabinet minister Esther McVey) may be more at risk.

We therefore estimate these effects using the second dataset, which includes only students who live away from home during term-time.

We find there are 35 constituencies where the number of returning students could exceed the projected size of the majority there. This could include around 1,200 students returning to West Suffolk, 1,600 to Mid Sussex and some 2,000 students to Surrey Heath. More than two-thirds of these seats are in the South East, South West or East of England and they were all held by the Conservatives in 2019.

Where returning students could hold the balance of power

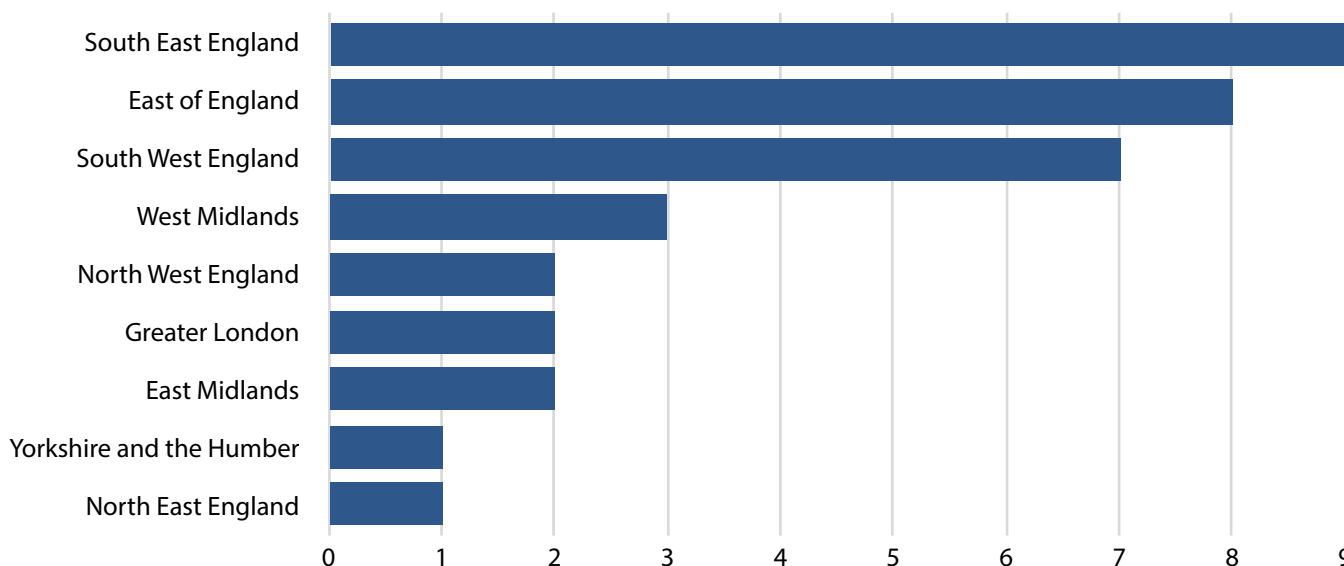


Figure 7 Seats where the number of students studying away from home is projected to exceed the majority.

These data refer to the numbers coming in, not those leaving (so on net, the number arriving may be smaller). But as they do not typically have large higher education institutions nearby, they are likely to have fewer term-time student residents.

As a result, it is possible returning students make a difference in these new marginals, particularly where Labour is the main challenger. But the impact depends on a few unknown factors: how many students return before the election, how many turn out to vote (projected at around 68%) and how many vote Labour, Liberal Democrat, or for other parties.¹⁰ We will have to wait until 4 July to know for sure.

Conclusion

As HEPI Director Nick Hillman notes in his recent blog on student voters, when voting is tight, every sizeable bloc has a major impact and students are no exception.¹¹ The timing of the election also makes it harder to estimate the impact of the student vote than if it were held in October or November, as many expected would be the case.

This Policy Note suggests students could have a major impact, but in a very different way from 2019. They are likely to be a much more disparate bloc. But they may play a role in marginal constituencies in formerly Conservative-held seats they would not normally vote in.

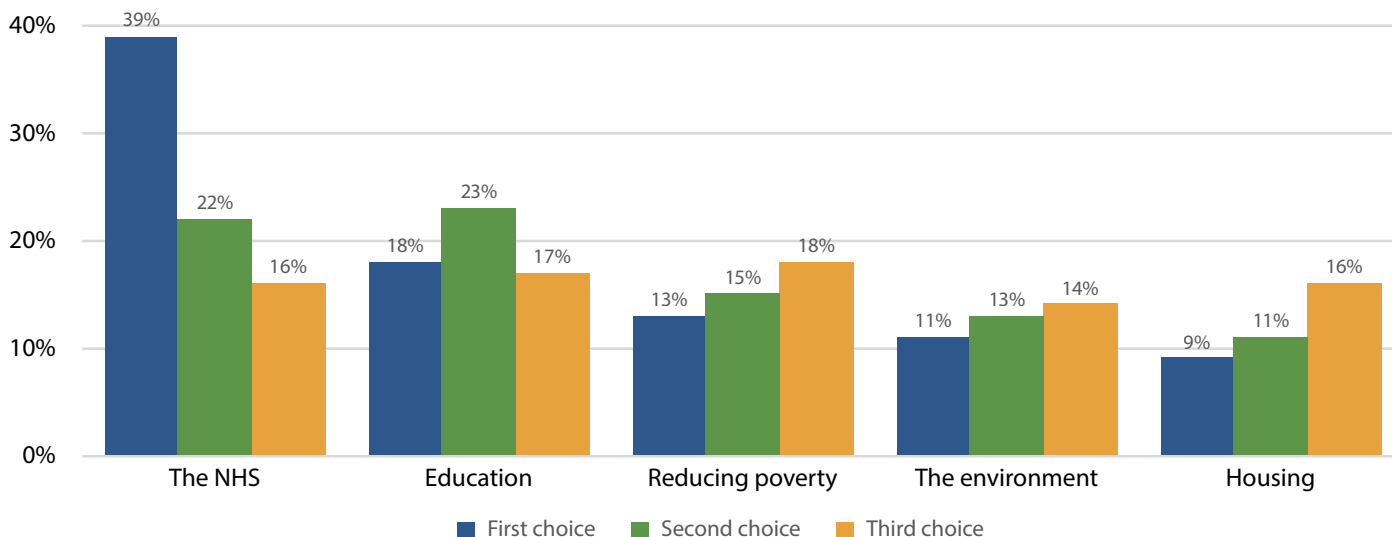


Figure 8 Top three policy priorities for students. Source: HEPI polling published May 2023. Top five most popular policy areas shown.

With the potential for students to have a big impact, parties should take their demands seriously. Many of the top priorities for students – the NHS, the environment, housing – are also priorities for many other groups. But understandably, students also care strongly about education, and any party looking to win and hold onto the student vote will need to make a convincing offer in this space.

Endnotes

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 - 2 HEPI and Unipol, *Student accommodation costs across 10 cities in the UK*, HEPI Report 166, October 2023 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Student-accommodation-costs-across-10-cities-in-the-UK.pdf>
 - 3 Adam McDonnell and Chris Curtis, *How Britain voted in the 2019 general election*, YouGov, December 2019 <https://yougov.co.uk/politics/articles/26925-how-britain-voted-2019-general-election>
 - 4 Nick Hillman, *New polling shows over eight-in-10 students expect to vote at the next general election, that nearly half of students support Labour – and 7% the Conservatives – but that students are split on what policies Labour should adopt on tuition fees and loans*, HEPI, May 2023 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/05/02/new-polling-shows-over-eight-in-10-students-expect-to-vote-at-the-next-general-election-that-nearly-half-of-students-support-labour-and-7-conservative-but-that-students-are-split/>
- NUS UK, *Third of students undecided on how they will vote at next General Election*, April 2024 <https://www.nus.org.uk/third-of-students-undecided-ahead-of-general-election>
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- 9 Nick Hillman, *New polling shows over eight-in-10 students expect to vote at the next general election, that nearly half of students support Labour – and 7% the Conservatives – but that students are split on what policies Labour should adopt on tuition fees and loans*, HEPI, May 2023 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/05/02/new-polling-shows-over-eight-in-10-students-expect-to-vote-at-the-next-general-election-that-nearly-half-of-students-support-labour-and-7-conservative-but-that-students-are-split/>
- 10 Jonathan Neves, Josh Freeman, Rose Stephenson and Dr Peny Sotiropoulou, *2024 Student Academic Experience Survey*, HEPI and Advance HE, June 2024 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/06/13/student-academic-experience-survey-2024/>
- 11 Nick Hillman, *How influential are student voters*, HEPI, 5 June 2024 <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/06/05/how-influential-are-student-voters/>



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