



Academics and students 'surging behind Lib Dems'

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Support for the Liberal Democrats among academics and students has surged, according to two new polls, raising the party's hopes of winning seats in university towns and cities across Britain.

The survey results, published today by the Times Higher Education Supplement, suggested Charles Kennedy's party had ended Labour's stranglehold on the votes of university lecturers.

They also showed a dramatic rise in backing from students, with 47% of those who had made up their minds saying they would vote Lib Dem - up eight points since February.

Backing among academics for the party - which is committed to axing tuition and top-up fees - has doubled from the levels at recent general elections to stand at 44%, according to an ICM poll.

Labour, which commanded around 60% support in 2001 has seen its share plunge to 41%, with the Conservatives on 10% - up three points since the last election but the same as 1997.

Only 15% of the 500 academics polled by ICM were still to decide how to vote, with 44% saying the Lib Dems had the best higher education policies, 21% Labour and 4% the Tories.

Meanwhile, the second survey, by OpinionPanel Research, suggested that Labour's share of the student vote has fallen by six points to 23%, leaving it just one point ahead of the Tories who dropped by one point on February's findings.

But the survey, which questioned 1,020 undergraduates between April 22 and 25, also found three-quarters expected Tony Blair to be returned for a third term.

The Liberal Democrats have identified 27 seats where Labour and the Tories enjoy majorities less than the total number of students in the constituency.

They include Labour-held marginals such as Bristol West, Cardiff Central and Birmingham Yardley as well as Surrey South West, Taunton and Orpington where the Tories have small majorities.

The list also features several seats vital to the party's hope of "decapitating" Michael Howard's frontbench team, including Haltemprice and Howden, being defended by shadow home secretary David Davis and Dorset West, where shadow chancellor Oliver Letwin won by just 1,414 in 2001.

Mr Kennedy said the latest polls would give the other parties a "shiver of apprehension".

He added: "At this election, our university towns and cities are key battle grounds.

"These poll results will send a shiver of apprehension through the Labour camp and confirm that the Conservatives simply cannot win.

"The momentum is with the Liberal Democrats.

"People are responding to our policy platform and our positive message.

"This is not just about our pledge to scrap tuition fees but our agenda of fairness for the country as a whole."

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