

## **The Student Vote**

The first comprehensive analysis of the political views  
of the student population over a four year period

**Paul Whiteley**

**Professor of Government, the University of Essex**

This paper describes the results of thirty-three waves of polling student political opinion conducted by Opinionpanel Research between October 2004 and May 2008. The report concentrates on turnout, changes in party support and also examines the differences between students and the rest of the British electorate.

## The Student Vote

### Professor Paul Whiteley

#### Introduction

There are about a million full-time undergraduates in universities and colleges in Britain. Once they graduate most of them will move into high status occupations and some will become politically active and act as opinion leaders in the wider community. For this reason, their current voting intentions provide an interesting guide to the future of electoral politics in Britain. For many students their political beliefs are not fully formed and so their opinions can change, but research shows that by the time they reach their mid-twenties most will have fairly well formed political opinions. Their current voting intentions are therefore a fairly good guide to how they are likely to vote in the future, particularly in the case of mature students.

From October 2004 to May 2008 Opinionpanel Research, the student research specialists, have collected data on students' political views. They have conducted surveys on more than thirty occasions, based on representative samples of the full-time undergraduate population. Each survey identifies student voting intentions, their ages, gender, course years and types of university attended<sup>1</sup>. These surveys provide the first comprehensive analysis of the political views of the student population over a four year period. This series of surveys is particularly valuable because it started before the 2005 general election and continues to the present time, allowing observations of student voting intentions in the run-up to and beyond the last general election. This report concentrates on turnout, changes in party support and also examines the differences between students and the rest of the British electorate.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> We define four university types – the Russell Group of research-led universities, other Old universities, post 1992 universities and other specialist higher education institutions

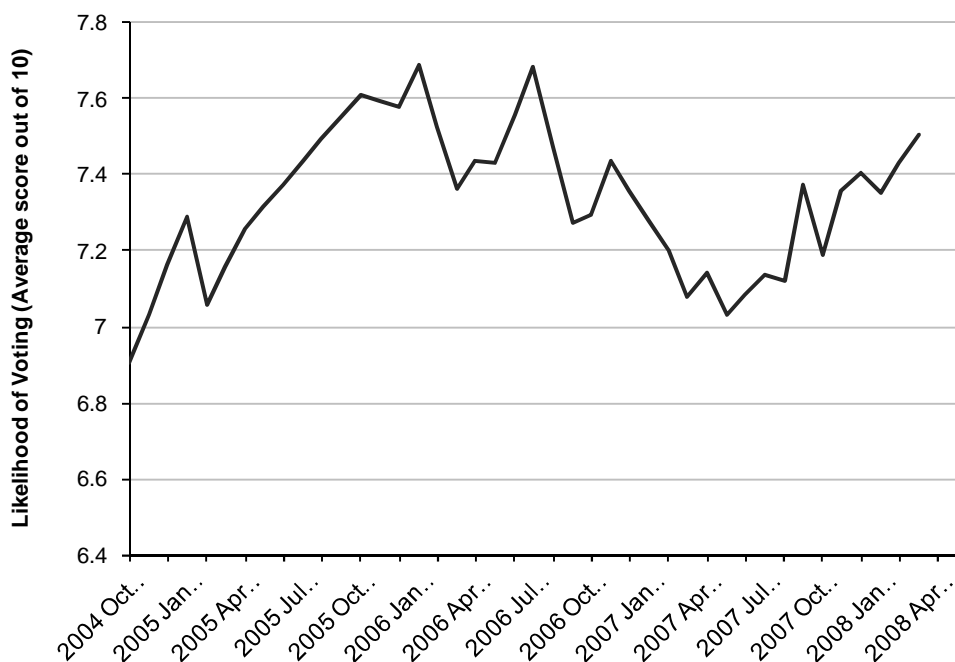
<sup>2</sup> The 21<sup>st</sup> May 2008 wave asked only about party preference, therefore all analysis apart from Trends in Party Choice (see Fig. 5) relate to the period specified in the chart heading

### Students and Turnout

In each survey, students were asked to indicate how likely they would be to vote in a general election. They were asked to use a ten point scale, where a score of one was labelled 'absolutely certain not to vote' and a score of 10 'absolutely certain to vote'. The average likelihood of voting scores for each of the surveys between October 2004 to March 2008 appear in Figure 1, which shows that turnout intentions fluctuated quite a lot over this period. Not surprisingly, voting intentions reached a new maximum in May 2005, at the time of the last general election, which peaked soon after and by May 2007 they had declined significantly. This pattern is repeated in the wider electorate and reflects the fact that voting is a rather hypothetical activity in the mid-term of the Parliamentary session. Lower scores on the scale are given as many people are not really thinking about elections. It is interesting to infer the percentage of students who are actually likely to vote from the scale. There is a well known tendency for people to exaggerate their electoral participation so we have to treat their responses with care. We know from the 2005 British Election Study survey that 57 per cent of students voted in that election, so if we count all students who are likely to vote (those who scored between 8 and 10 as potential voters), this would give a turnout of just over 61.5 per cent when averaged over the whole period.

There are some interesting variations in turnout among the students. Respondents from Russell Group and pre-1992 universities are similar in their likelihood to vote (69 per and 66 per cent respectively) and are more likely to vote than students from post-1992 institutions, of whom 56 per cent are likely to vote. The key difference is between the old and the newer universities.

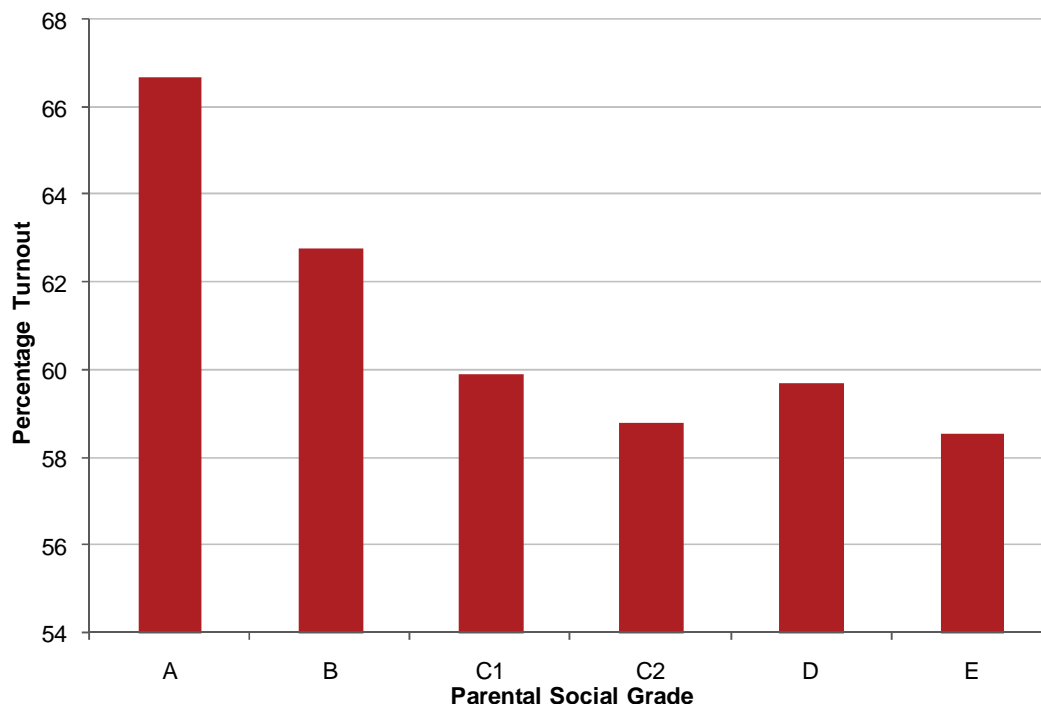
**Figure 1 The Likelihood of Voting October 2004 to March 2008**



Part of the explanation for the differences in turnout between institutions relates to the social class background of students. Figure 2 shows that students from professional white collar families are much more likely to vote than students from skilled or unskilled working class families. Thus two thirds of students from social grade A families will vote compared with only 59-60 per cent of students from social grade C1 or C2 families. Since students of Russell Group universities are more likely to be from Social group A families (39 percent) than pre-1992 universities (31 per cent) and post-1992 universities (23 per cent), this goes some way to explaining the differences between types of universities.

Unlike in the case of social class, there appears to be no significant gender differences between students and their likelihood of voting: some 62 per cent of male and 61 per cent of female students are likely to vote. There is however evidence that older students are more likely to vote than their younger counterparts. Thus 64 per cent of those over 25 will vote compared with 59 per cent of the students aged from 22 to 25. Altogether about 12 per cent of respondents are over the age of 25 and if they have families and mortgages this is likely to make them more interested in electoral politics than their younger colleagues because they have more at stake in the system.

**Figure 2 Student Turnout by Parental Social Grade October 2004 to March 2008**

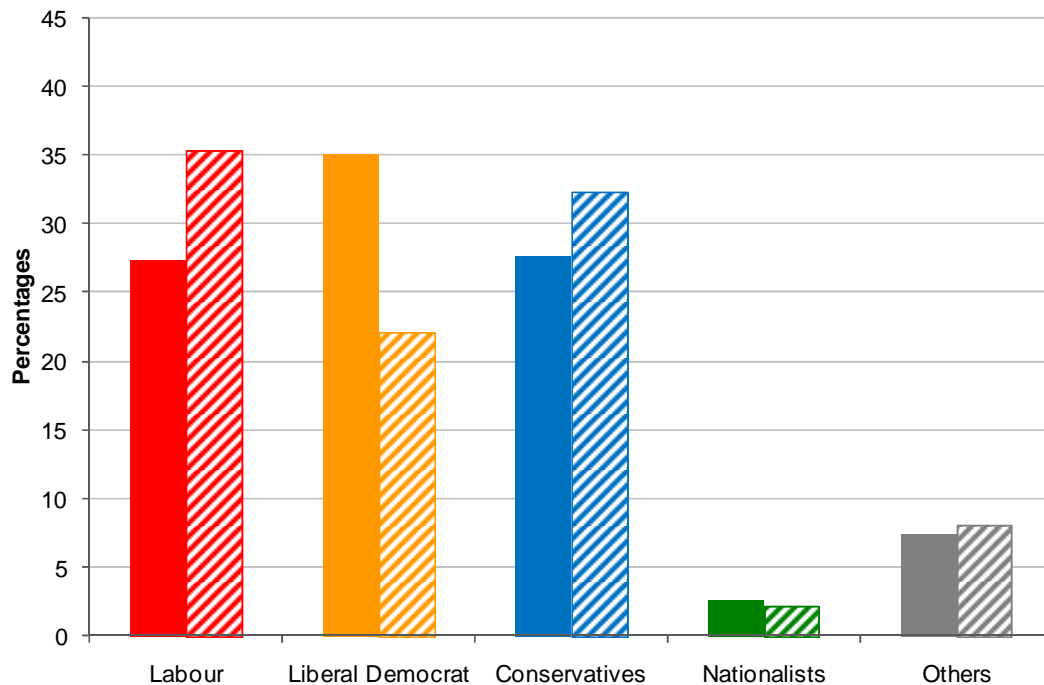


### Party Choice

The really striking finding from these surveys relates to party choice among students. As Figure 3 shows, students are significantly more likely to vote for the Liberal Democrats than for the Conservatives or for Labour. The first of each pair of columns in Figure 3 identifies student party choices and the second the vote shares for political parties in the 2005 general election. Thus, party support for the Labour and Conservative parties is lower amongst students than the general population voting in the 2005 general election (27% v 35% and 28% v 33% respectively), the Liberal Democrats are supported by a higher proportion of students (35 per cent) compared to their share of general election votes (22 per cent). If these figures are a guide to future voting intentions, then the Liberal Democrats are set to do much better among educated voters in the future. In fact, Figure 3 does not do full justice to differences in party support among students, since it does not take into account their likelihood of voting. If only those students who are likely to vote are included, Labour receives only 26 per cent of student votes rather than 27 per cent in Figure 3, and the Conservatives 29 per cent instead of 28 per cent. In contrast support for the Liberal Democrats remains at 35 per cent among both likely voters and unlikely voters.

**Figure 3 Student Party Choice compared with Party Vote Shares  
in the 2005 General Election October 2004 to March 2008**

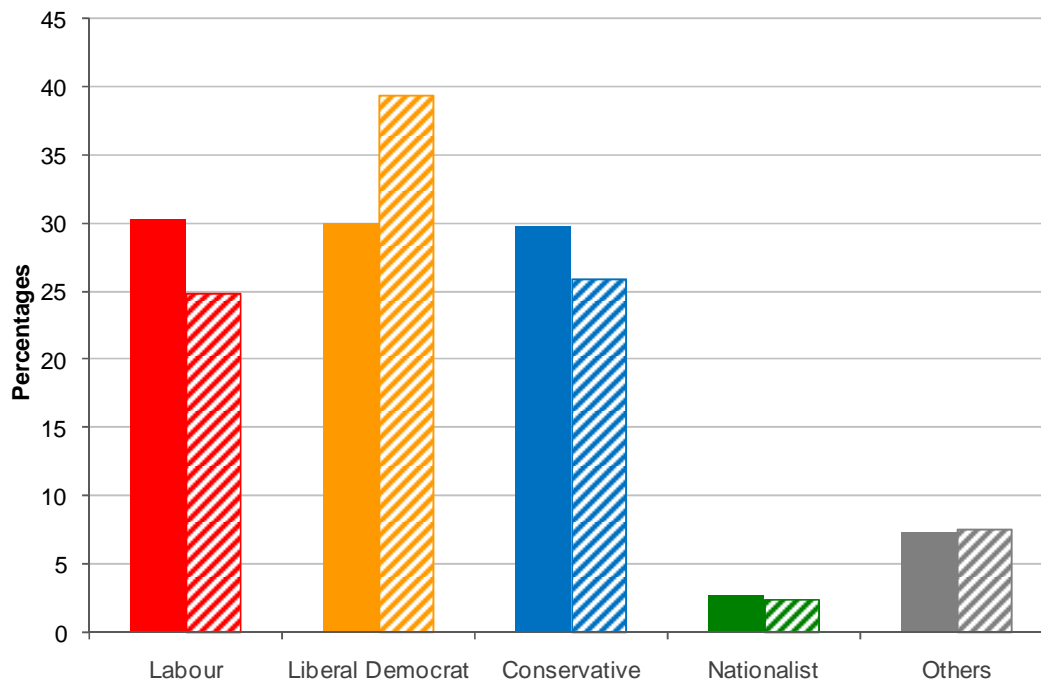
*Note: student choice – bars are solid; Overall party choice – bars are shaded*



If we examine the relationship between party choice and type of institution attended then, unlike turnout, there is not much difference between students in different institutions. Nor does family social grade make much of a difference to their party choices except for a small tendency for social group A students to be more Conservative and social group E students to be more Labour than the others. There is, however, one striking difference between students which is shown in Figure 4. It is clear that female students are very much more likely to support the Liberal Democrats than males, who tend to be more inclined towards Conservative or Labour. Altogether 39 per cent of females were Liberal Democrat supporters compared with only 30 per cent of males. The party seems to have captured the female student's vote in a way which is not true for males.

**Figure 4 The Relationship between Gender and Party Support  
October 2004 to March 2008**

*Note: males – bars are solid; females – bars are shaded*



The comparisons in Figure 3 made between student party choice and party vote shares in the 2005 General Election do not take into account the fact that voting intentions change over time. It is therefore necessary to look at how party choices among students have evolved during this four year period. These trends appear in Figure 5, which focuses only on the three major parties, and show that the Liberal Democrat advantage was even greater among students at the time of the 2005 general election than it was three years later. It is clear that Liberal Democrat support among students has declined and Conservative support has increased over these four years. The figure shows that the Conservatives did particularly well in the early part of 2006 just after David Cameron became party leader. At the time of the most recent survey in May 2008 the Conservatives were ahead of the Liberal Democrats, although the latter still maintained a clear lead over Labour.

**Figure 5 Trends in Party Choice October 2004 to May 2008**

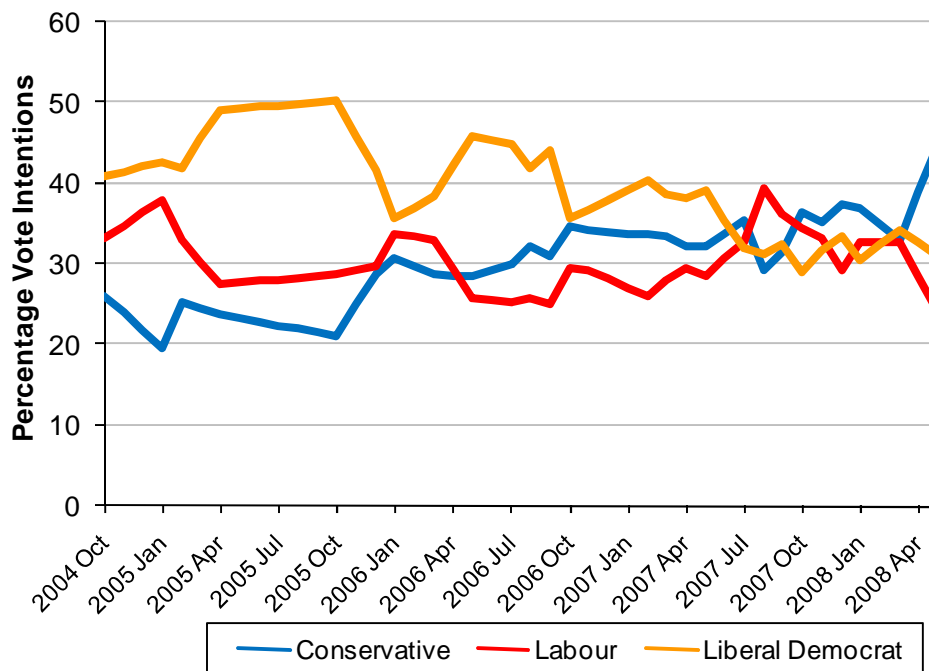
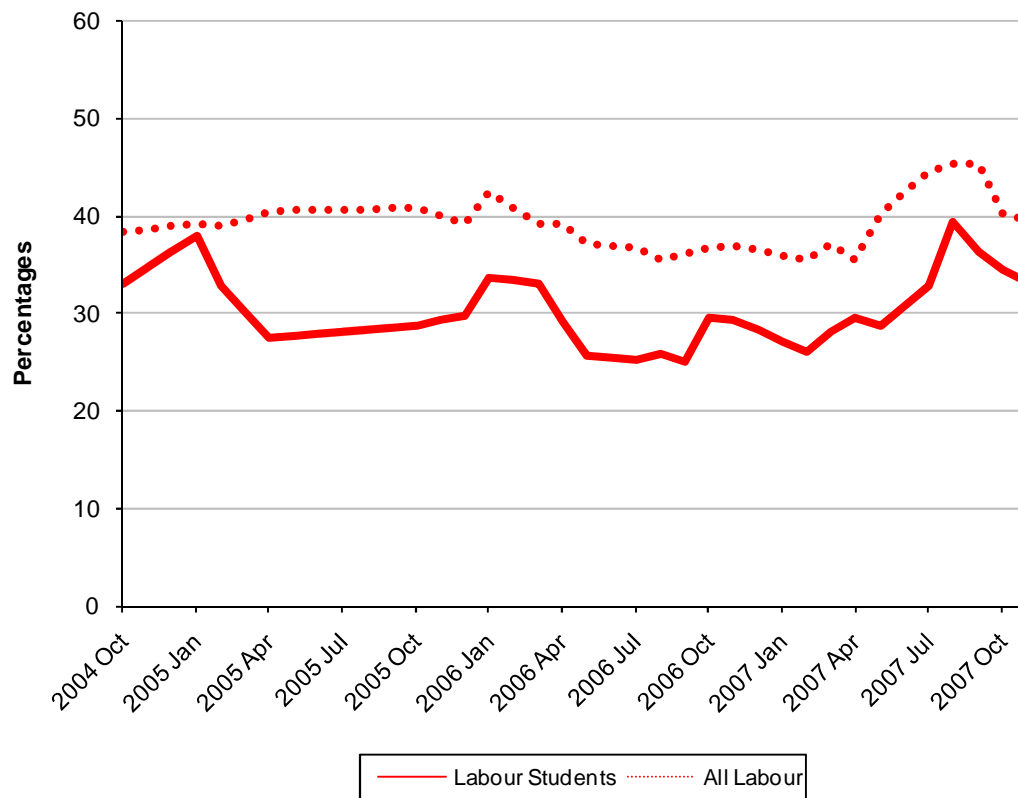


Figure 3 shows that party support among students is different from that of the wider electorate. But how does support for each party among students compare with support in the wider electorate over time? Figure 6 compares voting support for Labour among students with Labour support in the wider electorate using data from the Continuous Monitoring Survey of the British Election Study<sup>3</sup> to January 2008. The series track each other quite closely over time, indicating that the forces which influence party support in the wider electorate also influence students. There is no real evidence in Figure 6 that the gap between Labour students and Labour voters is changing over time.

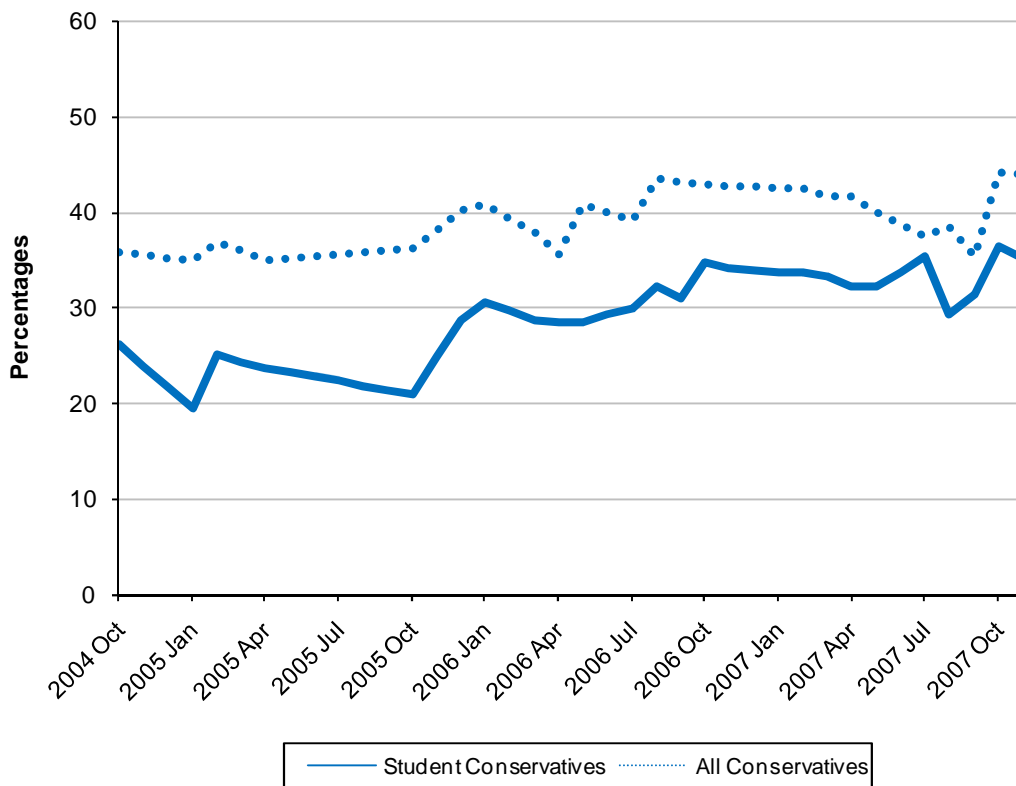
**Figure 6 Trends in Labour Voting among Students  
and in the British Electorate October 2004 to January 2008**



<sup>3</sup> The details of the British Election Study can be found on <http://www.essex.ac.uk/bes/>

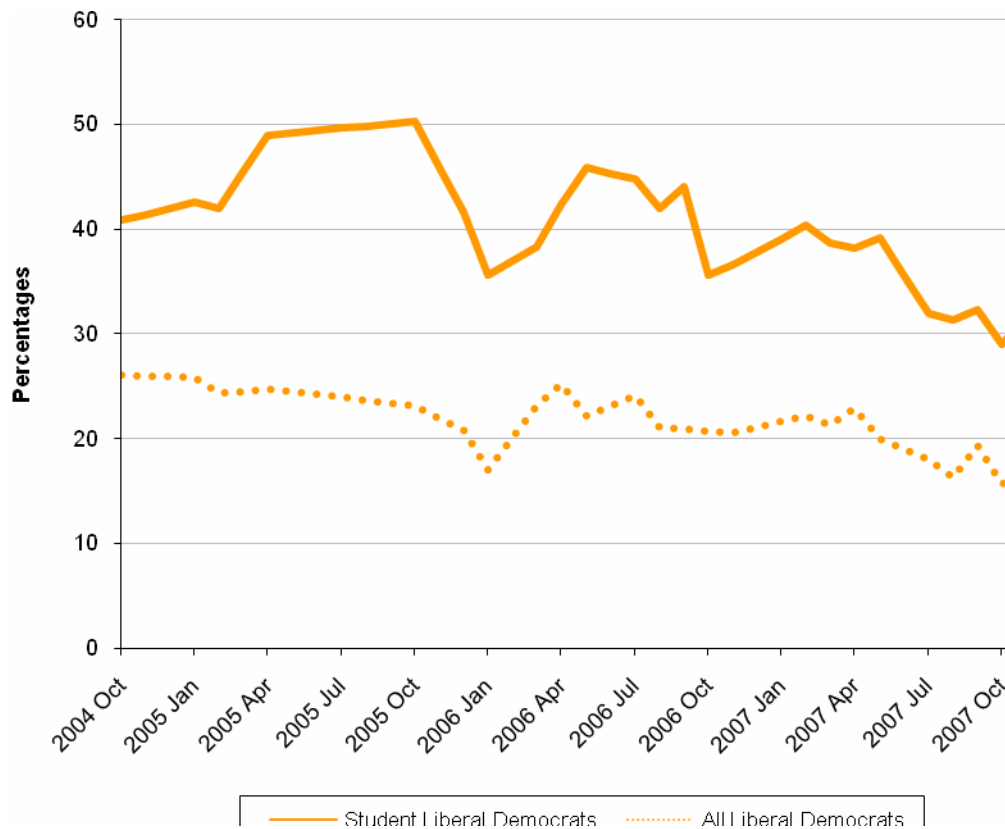
Figure 7 repeats the same exercise for the Conservatives. Unlike Labour, it is apparent that the gap between student Conservative support and Conservative support in general has narrowed over time. In October 2004 this gap was 10 per cent, but by December 2007 it had declined to 6 per cent. The change is not large but it exists.

**Figure 7 Trends in Conservative Voting among Students and the British Electorate October 2004 to January 2008**



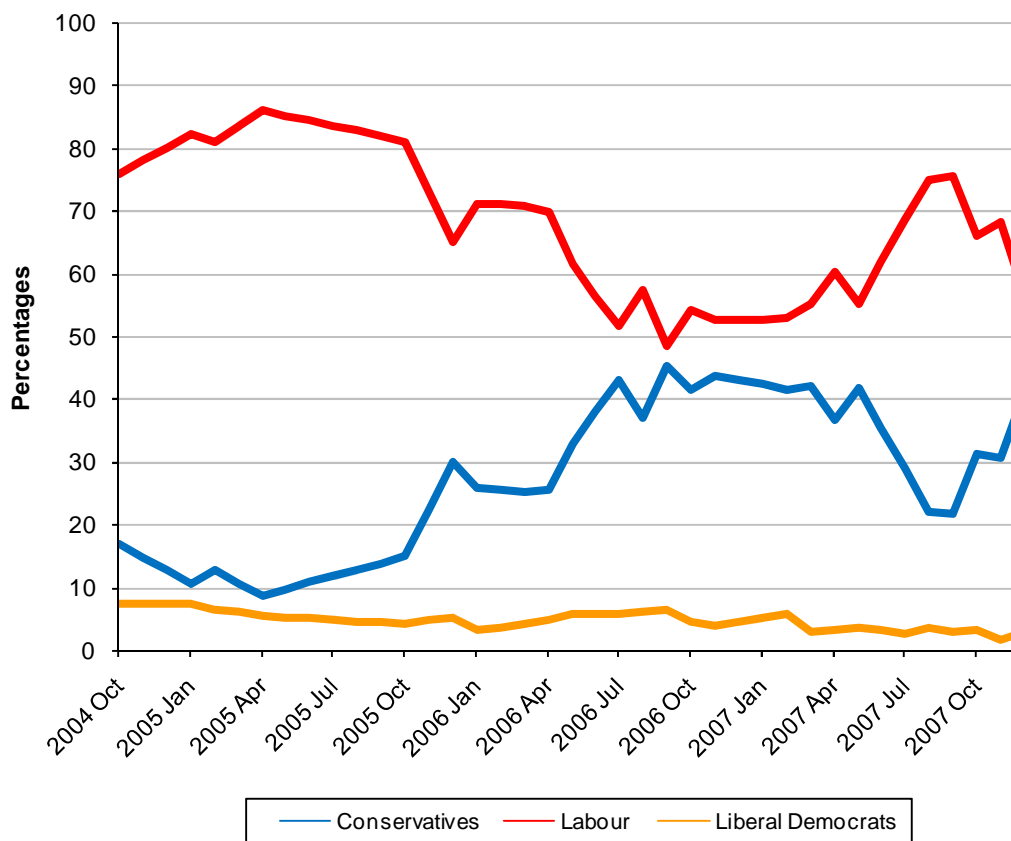
A similar pattern exists in relation to support for the Liberal Democrats. Figure 8 compares trends in voting intentions for Liberal Democrat students and in the wider electorate. Again the two series track each other quite closely, but they also appear to be converging over time. Liberal Democrat support has declined more among the public than it has among students, thus closing the gap between them.

**Figure 8 Trends in Liberal Democrat Voting among Students and the British Electorate October 2004 to January 2008**



Students were asked to state which party they thought would win the next general election regardless of their own political views. Figure 9 indicates that Labour lost its post-election advantage in the probability of winning stakes about a year after the 2005 general election. The appointment of Gordon Brown as Prime Minister gave quite a boost to the party in the summer of 2007, but this largely disappeared by the end of the year. As of January 2008 a majority of students still think that Labour will win, but this is a relatively small majority.

**Figure 9 Student Predictions of Which Party is Likely to win the next election October 2004 to March 2008**



**Conclusions**

The most striking finding from these surveys is that the Liberal Democrats are much more popular among students than they are among voters in general. Nonetheless, the forces which influence electoral change in Britain also influence students: over the last four years the Conservatives have gained support among students as they have in the wider electorate, and have a decisive lead over the government at the time of writing. The British election study showed that in 2005 students were slightly less likely to turn out than the rest of the population, however, this analysis suggests that this difference is explained by students at post-1992 universities being much less likely to vote than their counterparts in the Russell group and pre-1992 institutions. These differences bring down the average turnout rates among students in comparison with the rest of the electorate. Part of the reason for the difference in turnout between students at different types of universities is the social class composition of the student body within these institutions. But this is not the whole story, since research shows that students have less of a stake in society than voters in general, in the sense that most do not have dependents, high tax bills or mortgages to pay and without such responsibilities, students tend to be less attentive to electoral politics. However, students will acquire all these characteristics in later life, and this fact should make more of them vote. There are some unanswered questions which were not pursued in the surveys, such as the impact of student fees on voting behaviour and the effect of the Iraq war on their political support. But these are questions for another occasion.

### Methodology

The respondents questioned in the fieldwork for this report were members of The Student Panel. Nearly all had been recruited to the panel via invitations from UCAS. All respondents had their academic email address (ending 'ac.uk') verified by Opinionpanel. And all were credited with £1 in Amazon Gift Certificates for completing the questionnaire. Although some respondents may have taken part in more than one wave out of these thirty waves of fieldwork, the vast majority will be unique or infrequent responders as panellists are invited to Omnibus surveys on the prioritising the least recent participants. All fieldwork was conducted via Opinionpanel's Student Omnibus Survey, a fortnightly service. In all cases the sample size was between 1,000 and 1,100 respondents. In each survey, quotas were set to make the sample representative of the national student population in terms of gender, course year (1, 2 and 3+) and university type (with aggregations made for Russell Group universities, other Old universities, New (post 1992) institutions and small and specialist institutions). Quotas were set based on population returns supplied by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). On average, students from around 125 higher education institutions take part in each wave of research with typically the highest number of respondents from any one university being around 25 and the mean average around 8 respondents per university.

The research described in this report relates to fieldwork conducted between October 2004 and January 2008. Specifically, waves of fieldwork took place in Oct '04, Jan '05, Feb '05, Apr '05, Oct '05, Oct '05, Dec '05, Jan '06, Mar '06, Apr '06, Apr '06, May '06, Jul '06, Aug '06, Sep '06, Oct '06, Oct '06, Nov '06, Feb '07, Mar '07, Apr '07, May '07, May '07, Jul '07, Aug '07, Sep '07, Sep '07, Oct '07, Nov '07, Dec '07, Jan '08, Mar '08, May '08.

The questions were based on fairly standard voting intention and party preference questions, namely:-

Q1V How likely would you be to vote in an immediate General Election?

Scale running from 1 (Absolutely certain NOT to vote) to 10 (Absolutely certain to vote)

Q2V How would you vote if there were a General Election tomorrow?

Liberal Democrat

Conservative

Labour

Some other party

Scottish National Party / Plaid Cymru

Would not vote

Don't know

Base: All who are likely to vote, this is defined as scoring 8 to 10 (absolutely certain to vote)

Q3V Regardless of which party you happen to support, who do you think will win the next UK General Election?

Labour

Conservative  
Liberal Democrat  
Some other party  
Scottish National Party / Plaid Cymru  
Would not vote  
Don't know

### About the author

Paul Whiteley is Professor of Government at the University of Essex and co-director of the British Election Study. He is the author or co-author of some fifteen books and more than 50 academic articles on electoral behaviour, public opinion, political parties, political methodology and political economy. These include *Labour's Grassroots: the Politics of Party Membership* (OUP, 1992), *True Blues: The Politics of Conservative Party Membership* (OUP, 1994), *Political Choice in Britain* (OUP, 2004), *Citizenship in Britain, Values, Participation and Democracy* (CUP, 2004) and *Third Force Politics: Liberal Democrats at the Grassroots* (OUP, 2006). He has held appointments at the Universities of Bristol, Sheffield, Arizona, and the College of William and Mary in Virginia. He is married with three children and a dog and lives in Suffolk.

### About Opinionpanel Research

Opinionpanel is the fully independent market research company that owns and operates *The Applicant Panel*, *The Student Panel* and *The Graduate Panel*; with over 70,000 members Opinionpanel covers those critical, transformative years before, during and after life as a student. Opinionpanel provides clients with genuinely valid and representative samples. Research is anonymous, confidential and in line with the Market Research Society (MRS) Code of Conduct. Opinionpanel is an MRS Company Partner, offering clients a choice of full-service research, field-and-tabs, or sample-only services. For the last three years panellists have been recruited by email invitation sent by UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service). UCAS is the UK's central body for handling undergraduate applications and is therefore able to invite almost the whole of each starting cohort. This means there is very little systematic bias in the panel. All respondents have verified *ac.uk* academic email addresses which means only bona fide students take part, almost eliminating the problem of participants with multiple identities – something that plagues many of the online consumer panels available.

Student and Graduate panellists get a minimum of £1 credit in Amazon Gift Certificates for completing each questionnaire. Panellists get £10 in credits for joining. Amazon gift certificates are redeemed at £25. Panellists also get periodic feedback on the social and topical issues we cover in our questionnaires. Panellists must always be invited to take part in surveys which means client quotas or Opinionpanel rules such as 'least recent participation' are the basis for sample selection.

Over the past few years Opinionpanel has worked with many of the leading brands and agencies involved in student market plus much of the UK's Higher Education establishment. Clients include brands such as NatWest and Red Bull; market research agencies such as TNS, ICM and Ipsos MORI and Higher Education organizations such as

the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), the Student Loans Company. Opinionpanel supplies around 40 UK universities with market research services.

#### Links

[Key dates](#) - In British politics during the run of the study

[Demographic trends](#) – An analysis of student party preference by key demographics

[Data tables](#) – Data analysis of key student voting questions and demographics over 33 waves

[Press release](#) – Press release on the release of *The Student Vote* by Paul Whiteley and the latest data from Opinionpanel