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Students favour Lib Dems and Labour

Polly Curtis, education correspondent
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The Liberal Democrats will get the bulk of the student vote at the next general election with freshers most likely to vote against Labour, according to a new poll of students' political views.

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The poll of 1,000 students at 160 institutions revealed that 31% would back Liberal Democrats at the next election. The proportion of the student vote for Labour has increased from 20% last year to 28% this year, indicating a recovery since the height of the row over top-up fees last year.

However, the figures also suggest that younger students are increasingly turning against the government. A quarter of first years would vote Labour compared with nearly a third of finalists.

Some 24% of freshers also said that the government's policies on education and tuition fees would decide their vote, compared with 14% of finalists, indicating that younger students are feeling the brunt of the policy and blaming the government.

The Tories are lagging behind with just 16% of the vote, down seven percentage points in the past year despite their high-profile policy to drop fees altogether.

The poll, by Opinionpanel Research for the Times Higher Education Supplement, also highlighted that a binary divide still remains, politically at least, between old and new universities. Students at post-1992 universities (32%) were more likely to vote Labour than students at old universities (24%), where 33% of students would vote Liberal Democrat.

One in five students said that education and tuition fees were their main motivations influencing their voting decision, 12% said the Iraq war and 13% said the economy. However others cited issues as diverse as hunting, corruption, opposition to "kissing US arse" and hatred of Tony Blair. One said that Christian values and biblical morals would affect their vote, though it wasn't clear who that person would be voting for.

Three quarters expect Labour to win, 10% the Tories and

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6% the Liberal Democrats. One respondent each even said the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru.

David Rendel, the Liberal Democrat's higher education spokesman, said: "We've always been behind the other two parties in terms of the student vote until this election - but all the polls are now showing us ahead."

Kim Howells, the higher education minister, said: "This poll shows that more third year undergraduates would vote Labour. As students consider their futures, they realise that under Labour they will have a far better chance of getting a job, because we have delivered the lowest unemployment for 29 years."

Chris Grayling, Tory higher education spokesman, added: "Students are clearly turning away from the government and our job is to explain why Conservatives are the best option for them rather than the Lib Dems, who cannot form an alternative government."

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