ORANGE OR GREEN?

Sophie Layton surveys fellow students and finds the Lib Dems must be wary of the Greens' appeal

Recent polling has placed the Liberal Democrats as the most popular party for people aged 18-24, alongside the Green Party. Given that only a decade ago, the party had just been handed a phenomenal defeat after the Coalition period, the orange tide may once again be coming in, particularly after the May local elections, the rise of Reform UK, and the further falling of both Labour and the Tories.

But despite this figure, in many quarters, the Liberal Democrats still remain unpopular, and this is exemplified most clearly on university campuses, where the Liberal Democrats often feature unfavourably, if appearing at all.

Here, it is all too often that the pipeline remains, from right to left, the Conservatives, Labour and then Greens (with a turquoise Reform now starting to make gains). So given an unprecedented opportunity for further growth, how can the Liberal Democrats capitalise on this momentum, and begin to reclaim campuses as bastions of party support?

Having surveyed my peers, there are several insights that we can take. Firstly, for context, Sheffield has a fairly average Liberal Democrat presence. While we have no Liberal Democrat MPs, they are the second largest presence on the no overall control council, only eight councillors behind Labour, and were the second largest party in 2024 in the Sheffield Hallam constituency (although came 8,000 short of unseating Labour's Olivia Blake).

Of the students surveyed, 83.4% would or might consider voting Liberal Democrat, with only one saying 'no', and one only in local elections. Despite this, only 18.2% had ever actually voted for the party. In terms of attitudes towards the party, 50% view the Liberal Democrats positively, with an additional student leaning positive. But 16.7% felt neutral, and the same negatively, with one further person commenting on the party's "recent irrelevance". But seemingly confirming recent national data, 83.3%, if not voting Liberal Democrat, would vote Green, with only one person selecting Labour or the TUSC.

When asked why they would or would not consider voting Liberal Democrat, key themes emerged, most notably, tactics. Many pointed out that they're better or not as bad as others and often are more likely to win. Some pointed out that they would vote Liberal Democrat only if the Greens couldn't win. Several also pointed out that on some issues, the Liberal Democrats are more progressive than others, notably Labour but also occasionally the Greens, with drug policy and the response to transphobia mentioned (particularly following Green co-leader Adrian Ramsay's inability to confirm his stance on the validity of Trans+ women), and another praising Ed Davey's carer status. Detractors said that the party is not left enough, and another referenced the Coalition, specifically Ed Davey's role in it.

What it was that caused students to vote a specific way was more negative. Those praising the Liberal Democrats like a lot of their politicians individually, or voted for the Liberal Democrats in specific circumstances, but overall, the response is much less positive, with many preferring an alternative or mentioning the Coalition as a breach of trust (tuition fees, and a particularly frustrated response about Nick Clegg). Others did not know enough about the party or felt the Liberal Democrats were weak or weakening on key issues, specifically trans+ rights, climate and not taking a pro-immigration and pro-welfare position.

Finally, I asked what the Liberal Democrats would need to do to win their support in the future. Many said the party needed to firmly stand against conservatism, and many said they would not support the party until no 2010-2015 Liberal Democrats were still in the House – which now only consists of Alistair Carmichael, Ed Davey, Tim Farron, Tessa Munt and Andrew George. Others mentioned the party needing to become more left-wing, a desire for a higher education plan without further fees, and rescinding support for the Supreme Court ruling on the Equality Act (2010). For others, there's no significant way to win; "It's not really about liking Lib Dem, it's about them being the best out of a terrible bunch".

So what can we take from this? The party is certainly putting the Coalition behind it, but many have not forgiven or forgotten. The charge against the Conservatives is welcomed, but others want a clearer fight against conservatism itself.

Despite positive efforts from Christine Jardine, many also want the Liberal Democrats to take a more decisive pro-trans+ stance, which they feel is lacking following the recent ruling of the Supreme Court. But besides this, and a refinement of positions on other key issues, including immigration, students want to be given a reason to vote Liberal Democrat. This may be a winning strategy across a range of cohorts, but with the disillusionment that many students feel against the Labour party, now may be the moment to capitalise on this, for good.

Despite the headline, it's clear that universities are far from won over to the Liberal Democrats, but the appeal is certainly growing. While the Liberal Democrats are incredibly unlikely to ever take out the Green Party (or ever likely to wish to), there doesn't appear to be an immediate need – unlike the Tories and Reform, they're not chasing the exact same voters. But the willingness is there, and it may prove an unlikely battleground that could be rewarding for the party in 2029.

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