Voter turnout may be increasing, but close elections aren’t the cause

by Brock Hall

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Voter turnout surged in 2018 to the highest level in a midterm election in over a hundred years following the close presidential election of 2016, in which Donald Trump won several states with by just tens of thousands of votes.

But these two facts may have almost nothing to do with each other. An analysis of election data from the Pennsylvania Secretary of State for congressional races from 2002-2010 suggests there is hardly any correlation between close margins and high turnout.

Pennsylvania is a state then-candidate Trump won by less than one percent in the 2016 election. It is a larger state home to several Republican and Democrat-leaning districts.

But if close margins do encourage voters to turnout, we would expect to see an inverse correlation between voter turnout and margins. In other words, turnout would go up when margins went down.

That’s not the case. The data from the swing state’s 19 congressional districts suggests no relationship at all, even when taking into consideration higher turnout during presidential election years.

However, swing states in presidential elections do see higher turnout, according to Andy Bernstein, the executive director of Headcount, an organization that promotes voter turnout and organizes voter registration drives in partnership with musicians.

“What is hard to kind of pin down is how much of that is from increased advertising spending and how much is people thinking their vote matters more,” said Bernstein.

Ryan Enos, a political science professor at Harvard University, thinks advertising is entirely the cause for the increased turnout.

“As best we can tell, a voter doesn’t look and say ‘this election is going to be really close, therefore I should go vote’, at least most voters don’t,” said Enos. “There might be voters that really, really care about politics that are kind of motivated to vote anyway who might go do that but generally don’t.”

Enos emphasized that presidential campaigns spend more money in swing states and media sources pay more attention. Therefore, any increase in turnout would be indirectly caused by a close election rather than directly. Since presidential elections receive a lot more media coverage than congressional elections, it is much more likely to see turnout and margins inversely correlated during presidential elections.

Enos collaborated with fellow political scientist Anthony Fowler, now a professor at the University of Chicago, on a voter turnout study in which voters were informed that an upcoming election would be extremely close and their vote would matter. Turnout did not increase when voters were informed about this possibility.

“I think a lot of people have this intuition that turnout should naturally be higher during close elections,” said Fowler. But voters may correctly realize that the odds are still astronomically high their single vote will tip the scales.

“If we are talking about a gubernatorial race or senate race or presidential race, your odds of casting a pivotal vote are still basically zero,” Fowler said. He suggested that while the odds of a single vote mattering would increase in a swing state, it would still be around 1 in 10 million, as opposed to something like 1 in a billion in a solid blue state like Illinois. Fowler referenced a quote by political scientist Tony Schwartz to make his point.

“Saying that closeness increases the probability of being pivotal is like saying that tall men are more likely than short men to bump their heads on the moon,” Fowler said, quoting Schwartz.

But in the Pennsylvania dataset, some extremely Democratic-leaning districts do seem to have less voters participating on average. However, these urban districts have lower turnout for other reasons.

“Living in a city is correlated with things that seem to be strongly correlated to turnout,” said Enos, “Things like education levels and race, things like that, that are correlated with turnout, are correlated with living in cities.”

If close races aren’t corralling voters into booths, then there must be other factors that motivate them to participate in a process where their vote has little chance of making a difference.

“It’s got to be something else,” said Fowler, “It’s got to be that people are genuinely interested in the election and they want to vote even if they know their vote isn’t going to be pivotal.”

Bernstein thinks the characteristics of candidates are a far more motivating factor for voters.

“If you look at the recent political history of the country, clearly candidates matter, whether it’s people coming to vote for someone or against someone,” Bernstein said.

As for the spike in voter turnout in 2018, there’s clearly more to the picture that won’t show up in any data set.

“It is undeniable that Donald Trump’s election has changed the political landscape of the country and made voters on both sides of the ideological spectrum more motivated,” said Bernstein. “The midterm elections of 2018, even though Trump wasn’t on the ballot, were certainly seen as a referendum on Trump. What we saw is a large increase in turnout among both Democrats and Republicans.”

Young voters were an important part of the increase in turnout in 2018. While only 21 percent of eligible voters participated in the 2014 midterms, 31 percent voted in 2018 according to a study by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.

“Young people love to connect the issues that they are passionate about to the elections they are participating in,” said Shaniece Simmons, the associate director of civic engagement for Rock the Vote, one of the most well-known organizations that encourages youth civic participation, “In 2018, we saw one of the most recent and largest youth movements, and that was March for our Lives.”

The enthusiasm of voters of all ages doesn’t seem to be waning. According to a recent poll from CNN, voter enthusiasm in June of 2019 is nearing heights not usually seen until the month before the general presidential election takes place.

However high voter turnout may end up being in 2020, it seems like the increase will be anything but marginal.