From the 2000 general election to the 2018 midterm election, early and mail-in balloting have made up a steadily increasing share of the votes cast in those elections, a trend that is not reflected in the official state statistics.

WHY IS THAT?

It’s not that the state’s statistics are wrong or lying. Those numbers measure early voting turnout against all registered voters, which is a standard way to determine turnout. It does not, however, answer the question I had: Of the votes cast in a particular election, how many were cast before Election Day?

It turns out that early and mail-in ballots have made up an increasing share of votes cast in every election since 2000, even in midterm years when Texas’ already dismal voter turnout dropped precipitously.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Data can show trends but doesn’t necessarily explain itself. However, there are several possibilities and lines of inquiry that can be explored, including:

Increasing partisanship means people have made up their minds and are ready to vote.

Organized campaigns want to “lock in” votes once they find support.

Early and mail-in voting are more convenient than having to make it to a specific polling place on a specific day.

Were there changes in early voting policy that helped drive this trend?

Did the passage of a Texas voter ID law have an impact?

As the Texas population has increased, have there been demographic changes that contribute to increased early voting?

Whatever factors are driving this trend, it is reasonable to expect it to continue when voting starts in a sure-to-be rancorous 2020 election.