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## The myth of special elections

*The common wisdom is that their typically low turnout means they don't reflect the views of the wider electorate. But as a look at recall votes shows, that's not necessarily so.*

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Thanks to a hyperpartisan environment, special elections have gone national, with money and press attention flowing to these races as never before. At the moment, this is a particularly challenging development for Republicans, who since the 2016 general election have faced repeated, and at times shocking, defeats in a string of special elections.

Nationally, the party has lost dozens of state legislative seats, a U.S. House seat in a Pennsylvania district that Donald Trump won by nearly 20 points, and what had been thought to be an ultra-safe U.S. Senate seat in Alabama.

Republicans, concerned that the poor special election results suggested that a “blue wave” was coming last November, played down each loss as the result of a particular set of circumstances. This argument is based on a legitimate question of whether special elections are an accurate look at the wider electorate or are instead a kind of race that gives a special advantage to challengers in a what is typically very low-turnout balloting.

But while special elections could appear to be in a class by themselves, this may not be the case. There is one common type of special elections — recalls — that suggests that special elections can in fact be a fairly good indicator of regular elections.

It's true that in special elections turnout is usually lower than in general elections, sometimes dramatically so. Despite some rare examples of high-turnout special elections, such as the gubernatorial recalls in California in 2003 and Wisconsin in 2012 and the 2017 race to fill a vacant Alabama U.S. Senate seat, special elections generally take place in the shadows of the news cycle.

Unlike most special elections, recalls can take place either on a separate date or they can be put on the ballot at the same time as a regularly scheduled primary or general election. Much as with the arguments that special elections are a unique, atypical portrait of the electorate, when I began studying the recall I thought that stand-alone recalls would be more likely to result in an incumbent losing office than those that take place on a regularly scheduled election date. According to this theory, the fact that it is a special election means that the more motivated, “angrier” party will have an easier time turning out its base — which would explain why the out-of-office party has done better in many special elections.

But after compiling a list of the recalls that took place over six years, my theory was shot down. Sitting officials, it turns out, are not disproportionately hurt — and sometimes may actually be

helped — by when a recall election is held. Moreover, the more-motivated, angrier voters do not seem to skew special elections in an obviously predictable way.

From 2011 to 2018, there were 861 recall efforts in 30 states — from Wisconsin's governor and three state Senate leaders to mayors, sheriffs, school board members and fire district commissioners — that went to a vote. (Another 169 officials resigned in the face of a recall.) Of those 861 recalls, 519 resulted in an ouster, while in 342 cases the incumbent survived the vote, a 60 percent removal rate.

What is particularly meaningful for followers of special elections is that in breaking those 861 recalls down, the date of the vote did seem to have had an impact, but not the expected one.

The vast majority of these recalls, 539 of them, were stand-alone special elections, where 58 percent of the incumbent officials lost their vote. But recalls that took place on the same day as a general or a primary election saw a 64 percent removal rate. Every recall is different — though despite perception, only a small few are about corruption issues — but apparently having a special election where the presumably more angry group of voters is motivated to turn out to vote for a single issue may not help. On the whole, it seems that special elections may not always benefit the more motivated party.

The same phenomena may be at work with special elections in general. Turnout may be lower and one party may be angrier or more likely to show up at the polls. But the smaller turnout may nonetheless be presenting a reasonably accurate picture of the electorate as a whole.

While a string of special election defeats can be seen as simply one-off losses that have little to do with the overall tenor of the electorate, recalls provide evidence that special elections can be a real warning of impending trouble beyond just a small subset of motivated voters. A failure to reverse the trend of setbacks in special elections — no matter when they're held — may be a real sign of things to come in the next general election.