Will the Weather Affect Voter Turnout on Election Day?

A rainy day can be inconvenient, but on Election Day, it can be devastating.

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Rain actually does deter people from voting, according to a study. (GETTY IMAGES)

THE IDEA THAT RAIN keeps people away from the polls isn't just a theory. The adage that Republicans should "pray for rain" is backed up by data as well.

While extremely hot or cold weather can be a factor, rain is what keeps people away from the polls. A 2007 study published in The Journal of Politics examined voter turnout from 1948 to 2000 against the weather records for more than 3,000 counties nationwide, concluding that every additional inch of rain lowers voter turnout by around 1 percent. Snow has a similar but milder effect: Voter turnout goes down by half a percent for every additional inch of above-average snowfall.
The map above shows the weather on a county-by-county basis for each presidential election since 2000, and the corresponding election results. In addition, it updates with the latest forecast information for Election Day 2016, highlighting counties where any daytime rain is anticipated. Mouse over any county to see additional information, or click the links to show historical results.

In 2000, Republican George W. Bush won against Democrat Al Gore by a handful of electoral votes, a result that came down to some hanging chads in Florida. But the study also points out even the relatively modest rain in the Florida Panhandle that day likely deterred enough voters to put the election in contention. Clearer skies in the region could have delivered Gore to the White House, without an agonizing detour through Palm Beach County.

So who benefits from the bad weather? In cases studied between 1948 and 2000, decreased voter turnout benefited Republican candidates for the White House, with every inch of rain above normal garnering the Republican candidate an extra 2.5 percent of the vote.
However, it's the lack of bad weather that may come into play this year. Early models from the National Weather Service show an increased chance of rain in western New York and in Texas, Louisiana and Arkansas, all states that are not predicted to be heavily in play for the election.

Potential rain over the Pacific Northwest area won't matter: Oregon and Washington (and Colorado) all vote entirely by mail. In addition, roughly three dozen states and the District of Columbia now have early voting, though the expectation is that the majority of votes will be cast on Election Day itself. In 2012, 31.6 percent of all votes were cast prior to Election Day, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

Current models show key swing states in the East – North Carolina, Florida, Ohio and Pennsylvania, in particular – will be fairly warm with bright sun and temperatures in the 50s, 60s and 70s. But this is the weather we're talking about, and any meteorologist would remind you that the forecast is more of a best-educated guess this far in advance.

So voters and journalists alike are watching the skies, and U.S. News will be updating our interactive map every day. But as far as the weather is concerned, the brighter the sun shines, the more likely it is that the Democrats will benefit.