If Ranked Choice Voting (RCV) had been used in 2016 would Donald Trump had been elected President?

Nobel Laureates Maskin and Sen (LINK to recent op-ed) make a strong case against the use of plurality elections. And we mostly agree with them. While there is no electoral rule that is uniformly best under all circumstances, some rules look bad under many circumstances, and plurality is one such rule. They, like we, prefer rules that are more likely than plurality to pick a *majority winner*, i.e., a candidate who if paired against any of his opponents, head on head, would win a majority. There are only a few rules that guarantee to find such a candidate if one exists. One such is *round robin pairwise voting*, where voters ranks all the candidates and the rankings are used to calculate the preferences for each pairing of candidates. From this information we can find the majority winner if there is one with certainty This is the rule that Maskin and Sen favor most (lINK to their 2016 op-ed). .

However, in their more recent 2018 op-ed they highlight the advantages of *rank-choice voting* (RCV). over plurality. Rank choice voting -- a.k.a. the *instant runoff*, a.k.a. *the alternative vote* (in Australia) -- also requires voters to rank the candidates, but the ranking data is used differently than in pairwise voting. In RCV, if no candidate has a majority of first place votes then the candidate with the fewest first place votes is dropped and her or his vote allocated to the next ranked candidate on the voters’s ranked list. This process continues until one candidate receives a majority. When voter preferences line up along ideological lines, rank choice voting pretty much guarantees a greater likelihood of picking a majority winner when there is one than will plurality (LINK TO GROFMAN AND FeLD on Coombs rule), though there are other rules, like the Borda rule and the Coombs rule, which also have a higher probability of picking a majority winner than does plurality.

Maskin and Sen provide illustrative examples of how alternative voting might work in a presidential election under alternative rules when there are multiple candidates. In one hypothetical example, they suggest that, with pairwise voting, Bloomberg might have defeated both Trump and Clinton; in the other example, with rank-choice voting, Clinton might have emerged victorious.

For RCV to potentially give a different answer than plurality the gap between the two top runners must be smaller than the total vote for the remaining candidates. Maskin and Sen point out that, in 2016, there were six states where this was true. But they do not identify these states nor look at the actual distributions of votes among these six states Here we do identify the votes share of the different candidates in FILL IN NAMES OF STATES and we consider scenarios to see how the second preferences of the voters who made a minor party candidate their first choice might have affected the election outcome.

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However, the calculations above assume that changing the voting rule from plurality to RCV does not affect the set of candidates that will enter the context, Implicitly, too, it takes the preferences of the voters as fixed. Bur while very useful as an approximation, we know that, if we change the voting rule, then new candidates may choose to enter or previous candidates choose to drop out. Indeed, even if the set of candidates remains unchanged, candidates may alter their campaign strategies. For example, President Trump, when reminded that Hillary Clinton won 3 million more votes than he did, pointed out that he was running to win the Electoral College; had the voting rule chosen the winner of the popular vote, he asserted that he would have campaigned quite differently. Under RCV, for example, candidates might explicitly campaign for second place votes from those who had other candidates as their first choice above.

If we were to change the voting rules form plurality to RCV we would not expect effects to be immediate. It might take candidates and parties a while to fully understand the implications of the new system. But a world of three or four political parties each of whose candidates has at least some chance to win will be very different from the world we live in which, at least at the presidential level, we have cartelized competition between a Republican and a Democrat, with the candidate of one of the two major parties essentially certain to win. A change to RCV could mean that a new centrist party might emerge. But it is more likely to lead to situation in which we would have extreme parties on both left and right getting more votes. As compared to plurality, under RCV, supported of minor parties could express preferences for such parties without risking that the mainstream candidate whom they preferred would be defeated.