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A Better Electoral System in Maine

By Eric Maskin and Amartya Sen
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June 10, 2018

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — A great deal turns on Tuesday's primary elections in Maine. For the first time in America, ranked-choice voting — a system likely to reduce political polarization — will be used to choose candidates for governor and Congress. And the system itself, approved by Maine voters in 2016, will also be on the ballot, as a referendum. If voters rescind it, Maine will return to the prevailing system in this country — one that often elects leaders who lack majority support, and turns off many citizens.

Besides losing the national popular vote in 2016, President Trump got less than 50 percent of the vote even in six states he won. What made that possible was the plurality-rule voting system, in which each voter opts for a single candidate, and the winner is the candidate with the highest vote total, even when short of a majority. Plurality rule is used by all states in presidential voting and every state except Maine for elections for Congress and governor. But, by electing candidates whom most voters haven't chosen, it aggravates polarization.

Moreover, it often deters appealing candidates. Mr. Trump and Hillary Clinton were unpopular in 2016; a late Gallup poll rated their unfavorability at 62 percent and 57 percent, respectively. Both Bernie Sanders (the darling of liberal young people) and Michael Bloomberg (supported by numerous moderates) might have made an attractive candidate as an independent. But both stayed out of the general election because they understood that, under plurality rule, they would be splitting the anti-Trump vote with Mrs. Clinton and helping Mr. Trump to victory.

Ranked-choice voting — now being tested in Maine and increasingly in use in municipal and county elections across the country — helps solve both problems. Under this system,

a voter ranks all candidates in order of preference. If no one is ranked first by more than 50 percent of voters, the candidate least often ranked first is dropped. The process then repeats until a candidate *does* achieve 50 percent of the top ranking. In that sense, that candidate has majority support and wins.

To see how, under ranked-choice voting, independents aren't deterred from running, consider a hypothetical scenario: Mr. Trump, Mrs. Clinton and Mr. Bloomberg are candidates in a state, and the electorate divides this way: 45 percent for Mr. Trump (they like him best, then Mr. Bloomberg, then Mrs. Clinton); 35 percent for Mrs. Clinton (they rank her first, then Mr. Bloomberg, then Mr. Trump), and 20 percent for Mr. Bloomberg (they place him first, then Mrs. Clinton, then Mr. Trump).

Under the current system, Mr. Trump wins with 45 percent, a plurality. And if Mr. Bloomberg doesn't run, Mrs. Clinton should win, since his bloc now presumably votes for her. But under ranked-choice voting, Mrs. Clinton wins even if *all three* run: First, Mr. Bloomberg is dropped (because he is top-ranked by only 20 percent), and then, with two candidates left, Mrs. Clinton wins (since 55 percent rank her first). Under this system, Mr. Bloomberg is no longer a spoiler.

Given Maine's impending vote, we emphasize the ranked-choice system here. Yet we should note that an even better voting system is available — majority rule, which we wrote about in these pages in 2016. In majority rule, voters rank all candidates, as they do under ranked-choice. But now the winner is the candidate who beats each opponent by a majority in one-to-one comparisons. In the example above, Mr. Bloomberg emerges as the majority winner. Though only 20 percent of voters rank him first, most find him acceptable. He defeats Mr. Trump by a 55-45 margin, and Mrs. Clinton by 65-35.

Majority rule hasn't yet attracted as much attention as ranked-choice voting. But we hope it will do so eventually; failing to elect a candidate that a majority prefers over every opponent seems undemocratic.

The Electoral College poses a special problem for adapting ranked-choice voting to presidential elections. Within a state, Mr. Bloomberg won't split the vote with Mrs. Clinton under ranked-choice. But the college makes vote-splitting *across* states a serious issue: Together Mr. Bloomberg and Mrs. Clinton might win a lot of states, but if neither

individually captures 270 electoral votes, they both lose the presidency. One promising end run around this: the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact, under which a state pledges its electoral votes to the national popular-vote winner. It takes effect once states that together control 270 electoral votes have joined. The current total is 172.

The compact is worded to elect the plurality winner. But if that were changed to electing the "national ranked-choice voting winner," that system would work as well for presidential races as it does at lower levels.

Still, national compacts — and majority rule — get ahead of the story. For now, the focus is on Maine, where reaffirming ranked-choice voting would be a real advance.

Eric Maskin and Amartya Sen, Nobel laureates in economic science, are professors at Harvard. Professor Sen is the author, most recently, of "Collective Choice and Social Welfare: An Expanded Edition."

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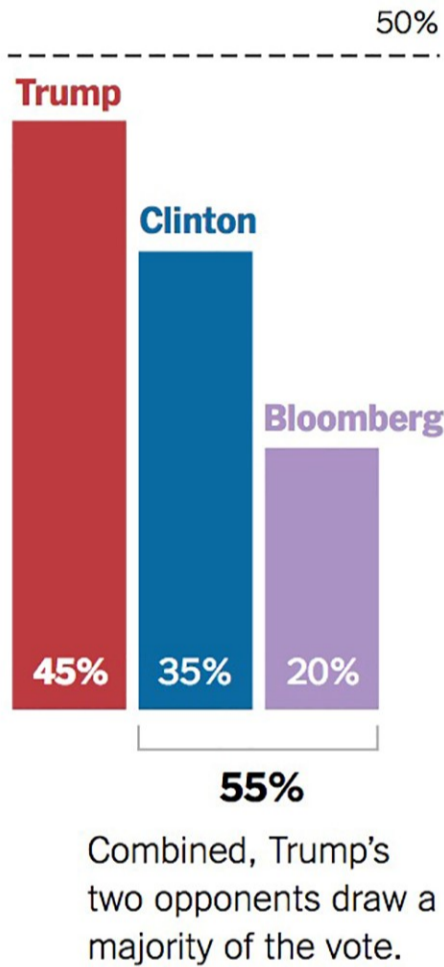
A version of this article appears in print on June 11, 2018, on Page A21 of the New York edition with the headline: Maine Tries A Better Way To Vote

And the Winner Is … Not Trump

Deciding elections when voters rank their choices, rather than picking just one candidate.

Now: the biggest vote-getter wins, with or without a majority

In this hypothetical presidential matchup, Trump wins, even though he falls short of a majority. A plurality is all that is needed.

- 50%

Trump 45%
Clinton 35%
Bloomberg 20%

55%
Combined, Trump's two opponents draw a majority of the vote.

If voters ranked the candidates: two methods

In the same hypothetical contest, voters prioritize candidates in this order:

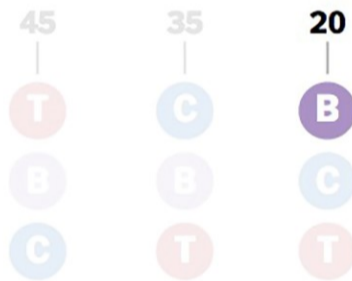| **45%** of voters choose this ranking:	**35%** choose this ranking:	**20%** choose this ranking:
1 T	1 C	1 B
2 B	2 B	2 C
3 C	3 T	3 T

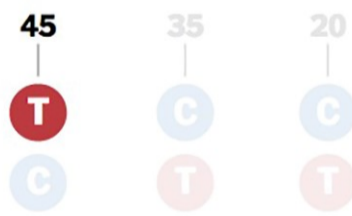### How the winner is picked:

Ranked-choice voting (Maine method)

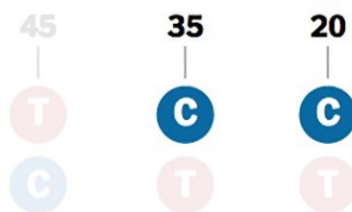Candidates are winnowed down until one is ranked first by a majority.

Bloomberg has the fewest voters ranking him first, so he is dropped:

45	35	20
T	C	B
B	B	C
C	T	T

Two candidates remain. Trump is the top choice of 45 percent …

45	35	20
T	C	C
C	T	T

… and Clinton is the top choice of 55 percent.

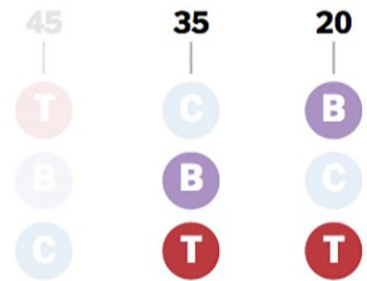| 45	35	20
T	C	C
C	T	T

With a majority preferring her to Trump, **Clinton wins.**

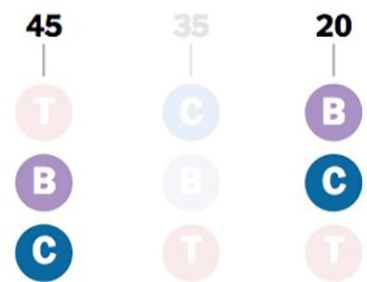**Majority rule**

The candidate preferred by a majority over each opponent wins.

Bloomberg is ranked above Trump by 55 percent of voters …

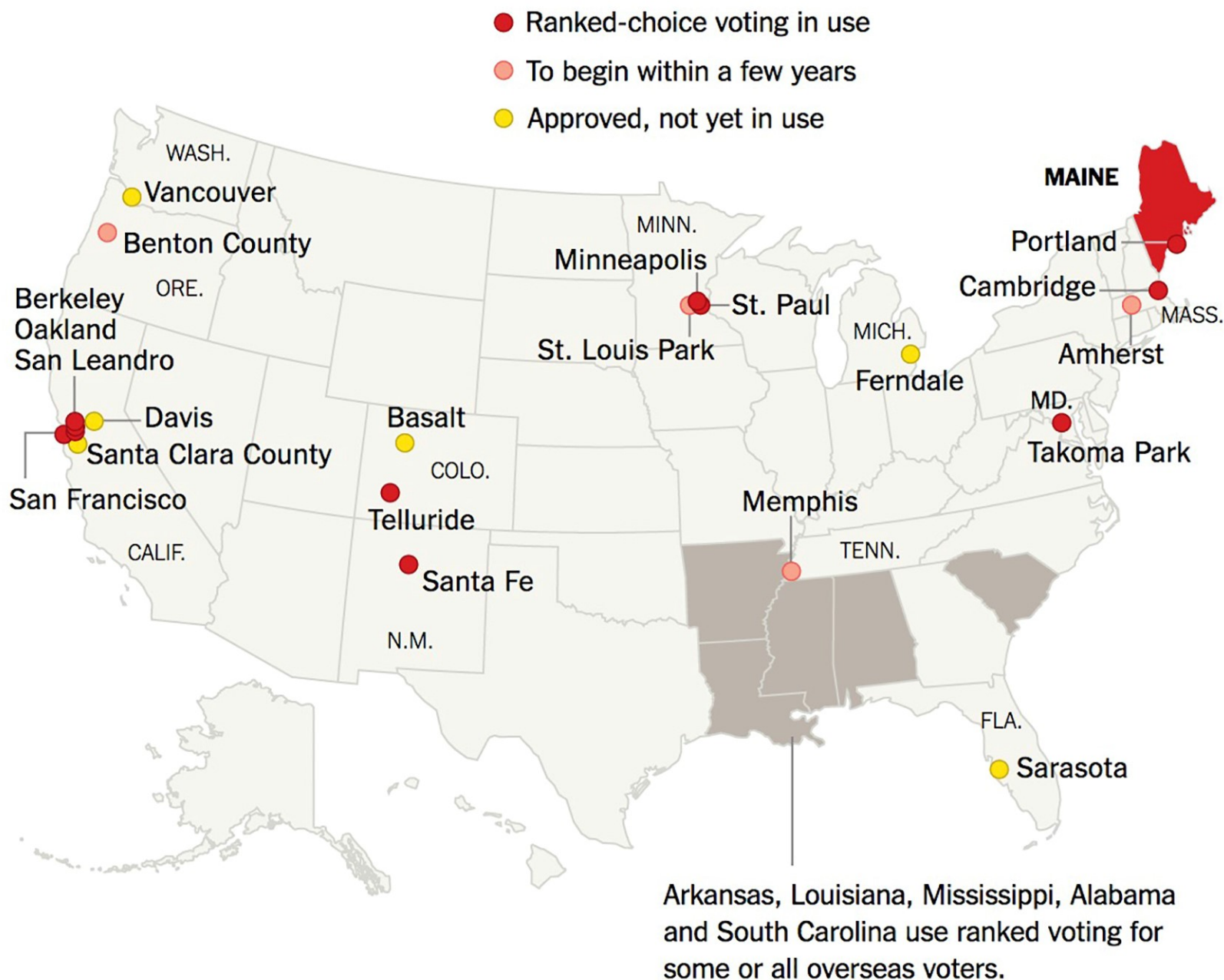| 45	35	20
T	C	B
B	B	C
C	T	T

… and above Clinton by 65 percent.

45	35	20
T	C	B
B	B	C
C	T	T

With majorities favoring him over both other candidates, **Bloomberg wins.**

Ranked-Choice Voting Across the Land

A few large cities, and more smaller ones, have embraced it. Maine begins using it this month for state and federal primary elections.

● Ranked-choice voting in use

● To begin within a few years

● Approved, not yet in use

WASH.

Vancouver

Benton County

ORE.

MINN.

Minneapolis

St. Paul

St. Louis Park

MAINE

Portland

Cambridge

MASS.

Amherst

MICH.

Ferndale

MD.

Takoma Park

Berkeley
Oakland
San Leandro

Davis

Santa Clara County

San Francisco

CALIF.

Basalt

COLO.

Telluride

Santa Fe

N.M.

Memphis

TENN.

FLA.

Sarasota

Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and South Carolina use ranked voting for some or all overseas voters.

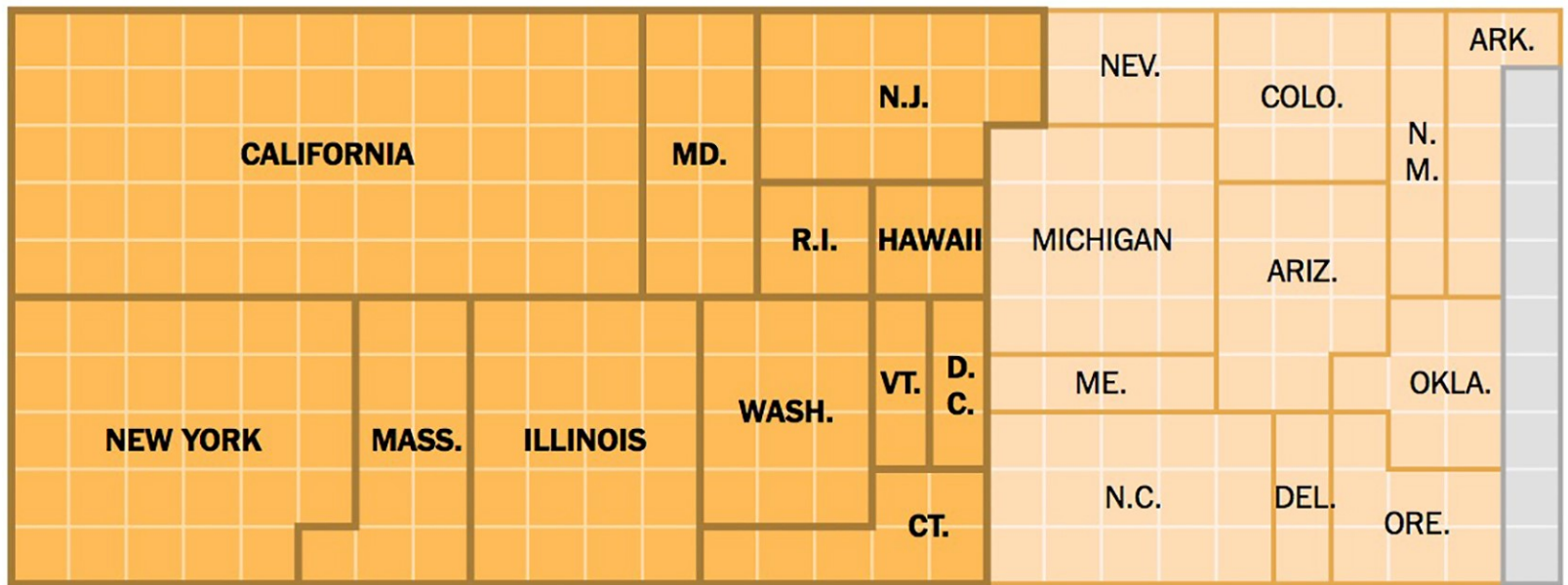# Forcing the Electoral College to Match the Popular Vote

The National Popular Vote initiative seeks to join states with a combined 270 electoral votes, the number needed to win the presidency. The pact would use states' discretion in awarding their electoral votes, giving all of them to the winner of the national popular vote.

172 ON BOARD

11 states and the District of Columbia have enacted laws to join the compact.

89 PARTWAY THERE

11 states passed laws in one or both legislative chambers.*

CALIFORNIA · MD. · N.J. · R.I. · HAWAII · NEW YORK · MASS. · ILLINOIS · WASH. · VT. · D.C. · CT. · NEV. · COLO. · ARK. · N.M. · MICHIGAN · ARIZ. · ME. · OKLA. · N.C. · DEL. · ORE.

270

ELECTORAL VOTES NEEDED TO WIN

*Both chambers in Colorado and New Mexico passed laws joining the compact, but not in the same year. Laws passed one chamber in the other nine states.

By Bill Marsh/The New York Times | Source: National Popular Vote