Date: 09/07/2009

The New York Times

Dear New York Times Staff:

I am writing to hopefully give you some insights and suggestions regarding your Democratic Election Map during the Presidential Elections of 2008 ([http://politics.nytimes.com/election-guide/2008/results/demmap/index.html](http://politics.nytimes.com/election-guide/2008/results/demmap/index.html)). First off, let me congratulate you in making such an easy to use, yet very revealing visualization. The color scheme is appropriate and allows for clear differentiation between the results. The ability to zoom in on any state from both the map view and the “date list view” is useful, and of course, the details-on-demand that appear as soon as one hovers over any element of the map are a nice touch, giving fast access to additional information.

However, let me point out some usability and accessibility concerns. Although the color scheme is good for most people, it might be hard for some to differentiate between the colors. Having a color scheme picker would help with this aspect. It needs to have only three or four options so that the selection is fast and effective.

The map would also be easier to read for certain states, if it included a zooming mechanism. For example once a user clicks on Virginia, there are several small counties that represent the borders of the cities. It is very difficult to see some of them and also to point the mouse over them to see the details-on-demand (see Figure 1). Zooming by using the scroll wheel on the mouse, similar to what Google Maps has, would be a boon to users with visual problems. One alternative to the zooming mechanism would be to allow the whole visualization to resize with the browser window. Thus, if one has a bigger screen, one could increase the map width and height and the small county features would be more clearly visible.

There is also a small but annoying and confusing bug in your visualization. Sometimes, clicking on a state unfolds the date of the election for that state, but makes the date list view jump in such a way that the state entry is not visible on the date list view. If one continues to click inside the counties, the date list view jumps up and down without ever displaying the selected state. This gives the impression that the date list view is linked to the counties, but confuses the user, as there is never any information about the counties displayed in the list.
Several other usability improvements could be made. For example: allowing the user to scroll the date list view by hovering the mouse cursor over it and using the mouse scroll wheel; highlighting the date when an election took place as soon as the mouse hovers over a state; conversely, highlighting on the map all the states with a common election date as soon as the mouse hovers over their respective date entry in the list.

I hope that these suggestions would make your visualizations more friendly and effective in the future and that your users will enjoy them even more.

Sincerely,

Dan Bucatanschi
M.S. in Computer Science Candidate
University of Maryland, College Park