To the New York Times Visualization Team:

I am a student in Information Visualization at the University of Maryland, College Park and I am writing to you with my response to your 2012 Electoral Map (http://elections.nytimes.com/2012/electoral-map). Between the Olympics and the upcoming election you have succeeded in providing a number of entertaining and informative tools for understanding complex events and I thank you for your devotion to the field.

When I first loaded your Electoral Map, I was pleasantly struck by the map-based positioning of the various states and the clear rationality of electoral votes. It was particularly useful to have the states sized by their electoral votes and to have the accompanying summary at the top to demonstrate how close electorally this election is. I also appreciate the geographic comparison alongside as it demonstrates just how much of the country one can travel through without seeing the democratic-leaning states that for now appear to dominate election outcomes.

It took me a little longer to discover some of the most informative features of the graphic, however. Particularly, I spent some time brushing over the various states and reading through the state-by-state discussions towards the bottom of the page before I noticed the narrative navigation buttons towards the top of the graphic. I believe you’ve done yourself an injustice as your narrative provides several plausible scenarios for the upcoming election and includes some very important historical context that is more difficult to get elsewhere in the graphic. For instance, at the second stage of the narrative it is easy to see how many of the states President Obama won in 2008 have become disenchanted and are now at risk this election. It is a more laborious process to understand this by reading the state by state discussions below the graphic. The remainder of your narrative reinforces your overall message that in many scenarios, this will be a very close election that neither party can be assured of at this time. I think it would be beneficial for you to move the narrative navigation buttons to a position directly below the map, above the date-by-state discussions. My reasoning is that with the browser immediately centered on the map the navigation buttons are obscured depending on browser sizes whereas visitors would have an easier time associating the navigation buttons with the map if they were not separated by the total electorate counts.

As I mentioned, I spent some time brushing over the various states before I discovered your narrative. I am curious: why are only the exact electoral votes available in the state details? You include the leaning of each state as well but that is clearly communicated through the coloring and pattern on the state’s graphic. I’ve spent some time examining your other visualizations and I believe that there are other sources of information that might be informative to include. For instance, other visualizations of yours have displayed recent poll data and demographics on a state-by-state basis. Might that information help users “make [their] own scenarios” as they are encouraged to try in the last stage of your narrative? For instance, your Swing State Polls (http://elections.nytimes.com/2012/swing-state-polls) illustrate some very interesting debates within the state of Colorado and some surprising leanings (to me, personally) in Ohio. Yet here on the Electoral map, both of these states are only labeled as undecided. I think at a minimum, visitors would benefit from the inclusion of recent poll results from the first question (“If the election were being held today, for whom would you vote?”).

I do have two final minor issues to mention. Firstly I have difficulties reading the white font of each state graphic against the undecided striped pattern. I also notice that you use black instead in the electoral totals above the map for the tossups. I think visitors would have an easier time reading the names of undecided states if the font were black instead. Secondly, the names of the states become occluded when they have few electoral votes since you are attempting to use the entire state name. I
think using the well-known state abbreviations would make the graphics easier to read as the electoral counts cause their size to shrink.

I want to thank you again for your continued demonstration of the power of visualizations. I have come to very much enjoy interacting with your works and look forward to your updates and new additions. As voters, we’ll all be overwhelmed with many more partisan messages than we can hope to reason about but I’ve no doubt we’ll be able to see things for ourselves through your visualizations.

In Thanks,
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