Dear New York Times Print and Interactive Graphics Team:

As a master’s student in human-computer interaction and more specifically studying information visualization, I have a particular interest in how The New York Times presents information to its readers. As such, I came across the data visualization titled Rick Santorum’s Race (http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/04/10/us/rick-santorum-map.html). This visualization effectively illustrates and compares Rick Santorum’s electoral success between himself and his GOP opponents; nevertheless, the visualization is not without its flaws.

To help illustrate the visualization’s usability strengths and weaknesses, I incorporate Shneiderman’s "Eight Golden Rules of Interface Design" usability heuristics (http://groups.drupal.org/node/8248). Shneiderman’s heuristics draw upon his expert knowledge, which helps me to better illustrate areas that I liked and areas that are in need of improvement. A positive attribute of the visualization is that it has clearly labeled of which color belongs to which candidate. Moreover, the visualization allows for easy reversal of actions by affording users the ability to easily rest the zoom location to see the entire United States within the graph. This is helpful if a person loses his/her position in the map because he/she can easily revert to the entire United States view. Another positive trait is that the graphic offers flexibility in how the visualization depicts data. It uses circles to demonstrate the relative size of a county’s population and therefore the actual weight a county has on primary results. For instance, if a user only looks at the County Leaders view, he could easily assume that Rick Santorum won the state of Ohio Republican primary because he won the majority of counties. In reality Mitt Romney won the Ohio Republican primary because Romney won more populated counties.

In addition to the visualization’s positive attributes, several key usability features would enhance its usability and relevance. One element that would help is the ability for users to perform a faceted search to search by specific taxonomy. Given “Mr. Santorum … had heavy support from evangelical voters,” such a feature would be helpful to pinpoint where evangelical voters live. It would allow users to compare the voting demographics that another candidate attracted. For instance, the graph titled Who Voted For Rick Santorum and Mitt Romney (http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/03/07/us/politics/how-candidates-fared-with-different-demographic-groups.html) illustrates the voter demographics that Santorum attracted.
Scott Abromowitz

Such information could allow for a user to better understand the reasoning why a voter might vote for Santorum.

Once more, I wish it would allow users to compare one county versus another county. It is true one could easily visualize the larger counties by the size of the circle, but it would be more effective if a user could compare counties based on various criteria, as it fulfills the heuristic to support internal locus of control.

In addition, for the line graph demonstrating front-runner status, it would be more effective and more consistent with the main graph if readers could hover to see the exact percentage instead of estimating the percentage by looking at the X/Y axis.

Succinctly, I hope my suggestions help better your future information graphics and that you continue with your wonderful design work.

Best,
Scott Abromowitz