Mr. Bostock and Mr. Carter,

I am writing to appraise you of my experience with and thoughts on one of your visualizations on the New York Times website. The visualization in question is “Over the Decades, How States Have Shifted”. This visualization is particularly striking at first glance. I have shown it to several colleagues all of whom were impressed. I believe that this is the strongest point of this visualization, it is intriguing, and somewhat visually stunning. When rifling through the pages of the paper it would be sure to catch the eye.

In examining this visualization I feel that it is helpful to break down feedback into three categories: static, dynamic, and experiential. The visualization works very well on a static level; at the same time, there are some interactive dynamic elements that I feel could use polish. I will proceed to discuss these details, positive and negative, and then give my take on the user experience.

The static elements are great. I understand that it appeared in the paper edition of the Times, making layout crucial. Elements are placed well, with few exceptions. The majority of the data in this chart is located centrally. It is good that many of the chart’s elements are also located centrally, so the reader’s eye doesn’t need to search for information. Examples of this are the X axis labels, and the presidential candidates for each election. Unfortunately the years of the elections were located to the right of the chart, forcing the reader to scan away from the data. The user would work less if the year was moved central to the data.
The use of horizontal size to denote the number of electoral votes for each state is intuitive. A size to importance equation is not difficult; however, when viewing the chart, the differently sized elements overlap, making it difficult to discern where a state lies, and to select it for more detailed information.

The use of Blue and Red to denote Democratic vs Republican leaning states is clear, and hooks into a useful cultural mnemonic.

While the layout is fantastic, the dynamic elements have noticeable pitfalls. The biggest such pitfall is filtering. Currently the user hovers over a state to highlight it in all years. There is no way to permanently select a state, forcing the user to hover their mouse while scrolling down the timeline. This is particularly difficult in crowded years. While on the topic of filtering, certain states are colored while others are grayed out. When the user loads the page there is no indication as to why only some curves are colored. This feature should be exposed, allowing users to decide which states are colored. This exists in a small way in the interesting examples to the left of the chart. (For instance, the “Highlight Tossups” button.) One last element of filtering that should be implemented is the ability to select which years the user wants to examine. Perhaps the user wishes only to see how the states have shifted from their stance between 1952 and 2012. Aside from filtering, I believe that the ability to zoom in on a particular area of the chart is very important, as it would allow closer inspection of the aforementioned crowded areas.
The user experience of this chart might vary greatly with the user. While the visualization serves to grab the attention of users, it contains so much data, that inexperienced users might have a difficult time absorbing it all. This is one reason I believe that the interesting examples column is so useful. It serves as a tutorial for inexperienced users. There are a few non-obvious elements, but the legend is located just to the right of the explanation, catching the user's eye before attempting any less obvious elements. The learning curve is short, so once a user starts figuring the chart out, they tend to grasp its entire meaning relatively quickly. The biggest barrier to user comprehension of this chart is the quantity of data displayed by default. Perhaps if the chart started by displaying only the swing states, allowing the users to add and removed states as they wanted. Overall, it is a fantastic visualization, but it's static elements are stronger than its dynamic.

Associated Issues:

When the page is not maximized it becomes possible for the header to un-center itself from the rest of the chart. I have included an example to the right. This happens because the header is resized to the window, but the chart is not.