September 19, 2013

RE: "512 Paths to the White House" (published November 2, 2012)

I remember seeing this when election results were first pouring in. I remember liking it then—still do. I've since gone back and examined it more carefully; I've compiled some observations here, along with some suggestions.

1. **It's appropriately scoped.**

   It's online. It's standalone. It's google-able. The effective audience seems very broad: likely of voting age, probably English-speaking, perhaps with little else in common. The visualization skews towards new users, assuming minimal familiarity with the US electoral process, offering a simple interface with helpful blurbs. I think that was the right decision. Visually, it makes for a cleaner page—good news for legibility. Semantically, the data is at its most salient for a very limited window—right around Election Day—so there's little time for users to learn complicated features, and thus little reason to present something more involved. I will say, however, that I would've liked a bit more detail. More on that shortly.

2. **It's well designed.**

   Visually, it's organized. Thin lines define logical sections; bold colors highlight important features; fainter shades fade neatly into the background. All parts have enough space to breathe.

   Semantically, it's fitting. The decision tree is an apt metaphor. Red and blue are traditional party colors. Flowing arrows emphasize top-down paths; bold circles convey solid endpoints; balanced reds and blues avoid bias. Kudos especially on balancing the reds and blues.

   Functionality-wise, I'm pretty happy. Descriptive headers provide context and instruction; the decision tree provides a neat overview; toggle controls filter and drill down; supplementary blurbs offer useful, flavorful details, further offering a sort of guided tour to keep you engaged. I'd like some more information about individual paths, however:
something—say, vote counts—that more clearly indicates why the path is a path to victory. There’s admittedly little space for that as-is, but there’s also no way to select a specific path to begin with—which takes me to my next point.

3. **Make the tree more interactive.**

The decision tree is already dynamic. It changes, it animates. I was a little sad, however, when I found I couldn’t manipulate it directly. The toggles work, don’t get me wrong. But it’d be nice to interact more with the tree itself, especially since it eats so much space.¹ For instance: it’d be nice if I could click on an arrow and filter the tree that way, or if I could select a path, pin it, and get more useful tidbits about its particular states. The latter could go something like this: fade everything else, straighten the arrows into a line, regain some valuable space, and insert some neater, more substantive annotations (such as the vote counts mentioned above). The best part? No additional space required. You’d need back and forward buttons for easy undos and redos, but these would fit alongside the topmost pair of arrows and would be nice to have, regardless.

4. **Polish a bit more.**

At this point, I only have minor suggestions. Most are little design things that irk me—but, of course, that might just be me. Here are some examples:

- The overlaid text is a little hard to read. Losing the transparent background would probably go a long way.
- The toggles’ shadows are a bit too subtle. Darkening them would help with lower brightness settings.
- The end state in which either Obama or Romney wins "in all scenarios" is a little messy. I suspect it’d feel cleaner if it were modal. (Currently, you can still toggle parties while that screen is active, but all you see are the little gray lines appearing and disappearing. It’s distracting. And speaking of distracting: currently, on hover, all end states remain bold. They detract from the focus on one particular path, so I’d rather they also be muted.)

¹ Also because the controls disappear when you scroll down—but that, arguably, should be fixed. You could float them on the top of the page, as is done here, or replace the legend with toggles altogether. I personally prefer the former: I don’t think there’s enough space for the latter.
Here are some things I'm merely curious about:

- How did you order the states? Did you order them by vote weight? Did you choose the one that generates the most legible tree?
- Have you considered dynamically eliding more branches for smaller screens, or rotating the tree for taller screens?

That said, I’d love to discuss this further. Feel free to email me! I've included my email below.

Sincerely,

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P.S.: Toggling really fast produces some interesting behavior. The tree starts doing an odd wiggling dance on Firefox and Chrome. Animations simply start to pile up on Safari. I suspect this could be fixed by clearing the animation queue whenever a new sequence is triggered.

P.P.S.: Thanks again for making useful, pretty "pictures". I really appreciate it.