To: Mike Bostock mike@ocks.org
CC: Matthew Ericson
Subject: Comments on the Visualization of “Over the Decades, How States Have Shifted”

Dear Mike,

My name is Yuwei, I am a student of Prof. Ben Shneiderman’s Information Visualization class at University of Maryland. As part of the class work, I have studied your visualization of “Over the Decades, How States Have Shifted” (http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2012/10/15/us/politics/swing-history.html). It’s a really nice work and I like it a lot. However, I do have some thoughts on possible improvements of it that I would like share with you here.

This visualization provides information about how the votes of individual states have shifted between the Republic and Democratic Parties over the years. One great thing about this visualization is that on the one hand, it provides a beautiful overview and presents all the information compactly on a single page, while at the same time, it allows the reader to select specific aspects of the data (individual states) and see how it varies across time. I also noticed a lot detailed information will be displayed when I trace each curve with my mouse cursor, such as number of electoral votes for a particular state. This is in line with the Shneiderman’s mantra of “Overview First, Zoom and Filter, Then Details-On-Demand”. I also like how you show how much a state shift from left or right between elections with the colored curves, it automatically highlights the “swing states” which are of most interest.

If there is a further chance to improve the visualization, I wonder whether you have considered supporting further control by the reader. For example, it will be great if I can highlight one or several states by clicking on them. In the current visualization, comparison between multiple states over time has to be done sequentially. Enabling selection will make this comparison much easier and can reduce the short-term memory load of the reader.

I also noticed that there are several interesting anecdotes listed on the left of the page. I feel it will be more helpful to make this region interactive and use it to provide feedback when the reader makes a selection. For example, if I move my cursor to the state of Ohio, it will be cool to see the note on the left about how Ohio has voted for the winner in every election since 1964. This informative feedback could draw more attention and interest of the reader than those displayed statically and passively.

Finally, I have some minor suggestions. First, I feel that the central region of the display is crowded with the swing states; it might look better if the X-axis is scaled differently to highlight the central region. Moreover, I think the states are not aligned to the X-axis of the display in “Chart Electoral Votes”. And also, it may be helpful to highlight the winner for each election with bold fonts.
Despite these suggestions, I think it is a great piece of art after all. I'd like to keep track of your work and discuss more about information visualization with you in the future. Let’s keep in touch!

Sincerely,

Yuwei Cui

Neuroscience and Cognitive Science (NACS)
1207 Bioscience Research Building
University of Maryland, College Park, MD, 20742

Tel: +01-(301)-405-1588
Email: ywcui@umd.edu
Homepage: http://terpconnect.umd.edu/~ywcui/