Color Associations

3 min

Once we've picked the right color scale, there are still a few more considerations to be made to reduce confusion.

First up, we tend to view darker colors as "more" and lighter colors as "less." For example, if we're visualizing which US states have the most pet ferrets, California – with the most pet ferrets of any state – should be the darkest state on the map. When this scale is reversed, people will tend to just read the graph wrong rather than reading the legend carefully.

We also come to data visualizations with pre-existing associations for certain colors. These can be culturally specific (red means bad vs. red means lucky), or influenced by the norms for a particular field (red means negative financial balance).

Sometimes it's good to stick with what's recognizable: it would be confusing for US voters if a major newspaper decided to visualize Democrats in red and Republicans in blue, since these colors are overwhelmingly associated with the opposite party.

But in other cases, switching up colors that have existing cultural associations can reduce harmful stereotyping. Using pink for women and blue for men reinforces an outdated,

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binary

view of women as soft and passive, and men as strong and unemotional. This design choice will not only turn off some viewers, it may also distract on a graph where gender is a relevant variable but not the whole focus.

It would be confusing to just reverse this stereotypical color palette, but there are plenty of good alternatives – check out two examples from The New York Times on the right. The important thing is to be consistent with the alternative palette.