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CHENNAI VOTES

PEOPLE VS IDEOLOGY

"Chennai Votes: People vs Ideology" was a public participation experiment that was conducted during the 2024 Indian General Elections. The experiment was designed as a reflective platform for civic engagement, structured around three key inquiries drawn from across research, data, and design: what motivates voters in a landscape historically defined by polarized digital cycles and "freebie politics"; how to represent uncertainty in a medium that has become rhetorically synonymous with truth; and how physical interfaces and spaces might be developed to ensure that conversations about data are not limited to academic or professional circles.

Background Photo Credits:
Karthick Gissen (has been digitally modified)

All other images are credited to the author.

This project was done as a part of my final year thesis titled, "Reimagining Interactions between Humans and Data" Project Guide: Tanishka Kachru Sponsored by the Ford Foundation Grant

Navigation:

Recommended sequence: clockwise, though you are welcome to explore freely.

Gender

Place

Age

Ultimately, the experiment surfaced both quantitative patterns and qualitative insights regarding migrant populations, gender representation, and the performance of political knowledge in public.

1

The Encounter

The core question of the experiment was, "Does a young woman in a marketplace approach politics differently than an older man in a quiet residential area?"

Scan the QR code to explore the crowd flow!

2

Case Studies

The intent of Chennai Votes is to move beyond extractive data collection, framing information as a participatory, visceral experience. It is informed by three case studies: The Significant Screwdriver (Bardzell et al.), Zinnbauer's concept of design as a "calm technology", and The Moodbeam Wall by Domestic Data Streamers. (top to down)

3

The Data

Each participant recorded their age and gender through encoded pins - The categories were female (18-35), female (35-50), and female (above 50+) | male (18-35), male (35-50), and male(50+). For the purpose of this experiment, gender was considered as a binary. The participants were chosen through convenience sampling, and verbal consent was taken for them to participate in the experiment and to use the documented photographs. The participant's anonymity was preserved, no names or phone number was recorded - this was also observed to improve the participation.

4

Results

Total number of votes for the option "Candidate":
183 votes

Total number of votes for the option "Ideology":
218 votes

5

Reflection & Learning

Approaching public space as a site for dialogue, rather than just display, fundamentally shifted how this project unfolded. While the inquiry helped me develop a unique design vocabulary, the constraints of this format preclude a full exploration of that evolution. The data collected is not intended for statistical generalization; instead, the goal was to explore how public-facing formats can invite individuals to engage as active knowledge-holders. By adopting a bottom-up data collection approach, the project prioritized localized, lived experiences over top-down metrics, inviting individuals to engage as knowledge-holders, rooted in their own lived experiences.

6

Further Scope

Accurately measuring patterns of use through repeated experimentation at different intervals fell outside the scope of this project, it hopes to inspire further inquiry.

On-the-Ground Observations

"Adhan avaru thanni kudichitaaru la ma?" *
"Isn't it enough if just my husband takes part?"

"Are you guys psychology students? What will you be doing with this data?"

The water stations were kept opaque to ensure that visible differences in water levels did not reinforce bias during the voting process. This moment of revelation created a communal event, with the public often waiting around to see the physical result of their collective choices.

401

people cast their votes by drawing a glass of water from any one station, over five diverse locations.

Multiple qualitative moments served as a reminder that data collection is also about creating space for connection.

The experiment was conducted in the city of Chennai in Tamil Nadu

Politics in Tamil Nadu is a deeply passionate endeavor. For nearly 60 years, the state was a duopoly governed by the DMK and AIADMK, two parties rooted in the historic Dravidian social justice movement. Political parties continue to employ the iconography of their founding figures as a means to evoke nostalgia and provoke loyalty, often independent of the party's current representatives. The need for a more nuanced inquiry led to the provocation, "People vs Ideology", moving beyond a binary choice between the dominant parties.

Scan the QR for the data!

Older women were strikingly underrepresented, raising questions about whose presence in public space is assumed and whose is conditional.

BEHIND THE SCENES

Process of making the water stations:

PRODUCTION COLLABORATOR

OUT OF THE BOX

DATA
IN
RELATION

VISUALISING COMPLEXITY,
INTERDEPENDENCE,
AND SYSTEMIC CHANGE

2015