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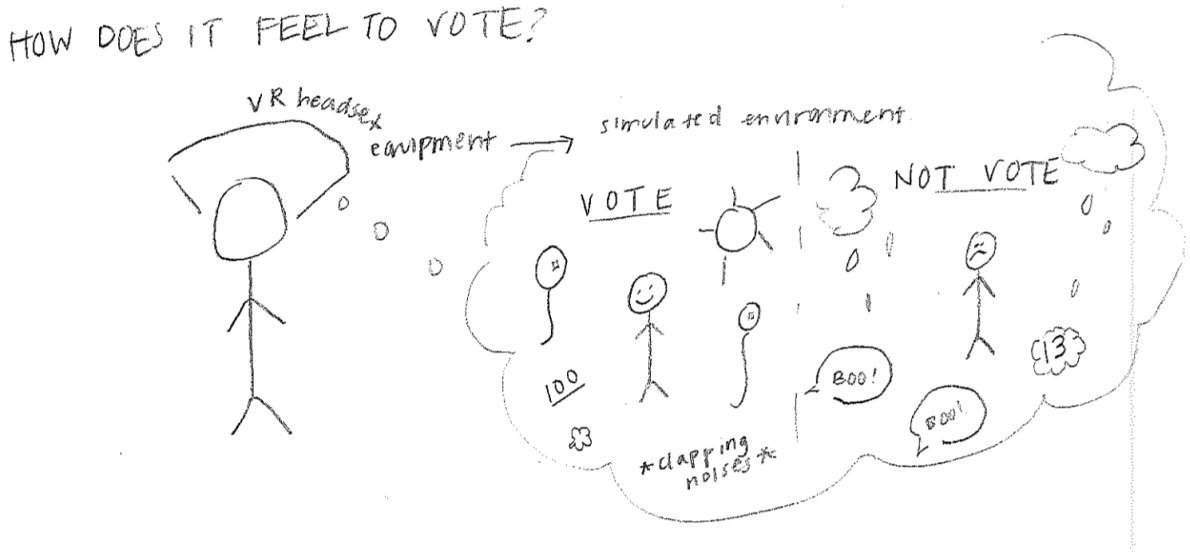
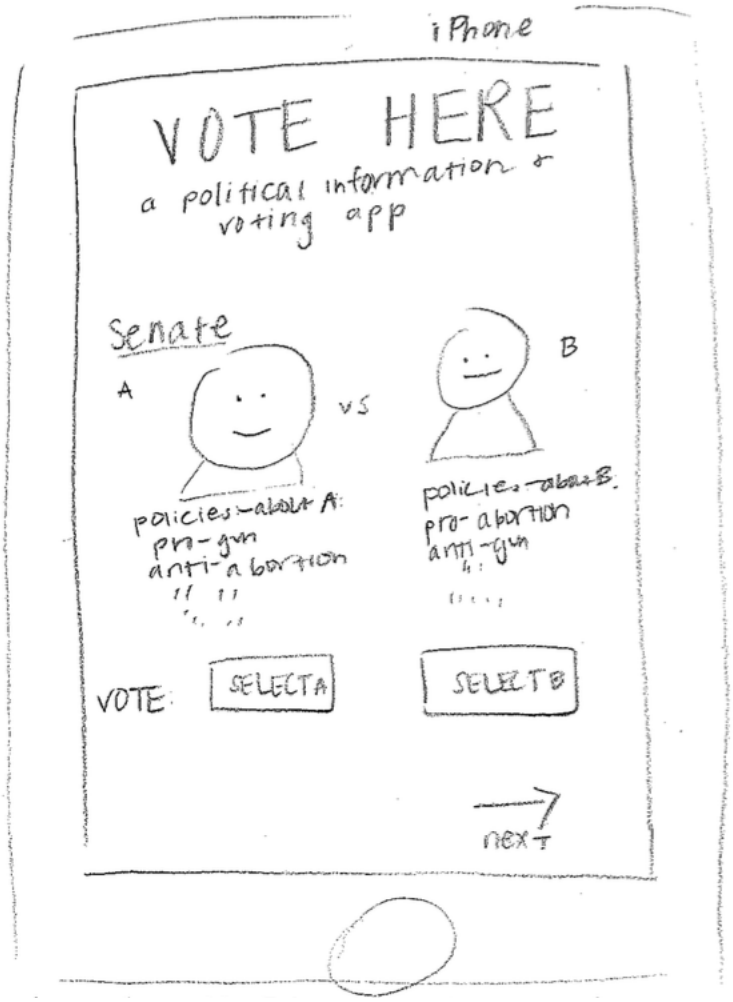
Mini-project 2: Increasing Voter Turnout through Persuasive Technology

PART A. *Three conceptual design sketches.*

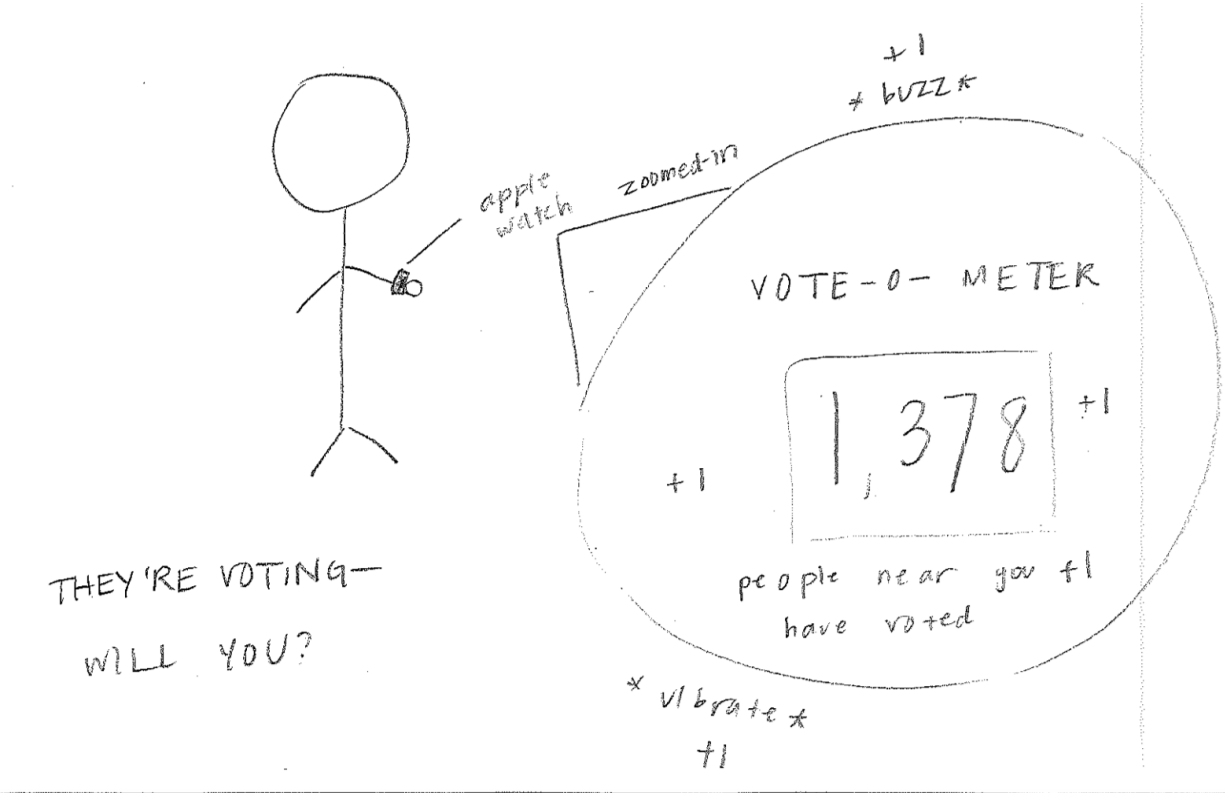
1. This design—*based off the persuasive affordance that "motivate[s] through experience, sensation"*—utilizes VR (virtual reality) to create a simulated reality in which the user can experience fictitious sensations that attempt to depict, creatively, what it feels like to vote versus what it feels like not to vote (Fogg 140). When the user attempts to vote in this simulated reality, they experience a floating, bubbly sensation, and are immersed in a pretend environment where it is sunny and symbols of good luck are everywhere—balloons, clapping, and four-leaf clovers. When the user declines to vote, they are placed in a pretend environment where it is dark and cloudy and symbols of bad luck like rain and the number "13" surround them.



2. This design—*based off the persuasive affordance that "reduce[s] barriers [like] time, effort, [and] cost"*—takes the form of a phone application. It reduces the barrier of effort by providing voters with readily accessible information about candidates that is easy to comprehend, regarding prospective political candidates and their platforms (Fogg 140). In addition, it reduces the barrier of time and cost because, since it is sponsored by the US government, it allows users to vote directly through it—there is no need to travel to a polling place because the app *is* the polling place.



3. This design—*based off the persuasive affordance that "establish[es] social norms"*—takes the form of an Apple Watch extension that vibrates every time someone near the watch's owner votes (Fogg 140). It also provides a meter that displays the amount of people near the user who have voted, which steadily increases throughout the voting day. It thus institutes voting as a social norm, inducing the user to follow this trend by voting, too.



PART B. *Final design.*

1. **Description of the behavior**

People want to lead good lives. The government dictates and regulates those lives. We elect many of those in government through the act of voting. Yet so many people simply do not take the time to vote. With the implementation of this design, I expect people to be moved to vote more. The *behavior* of people voting can be measured by voter turnout, which is a percentage indicating how many eligible voters voted in an election. Currently, this percentage fluctuates between 40-60%. With this design, I aim to increase this number. The greater issue that the behavior of voting relates to is that of political representation—in other words, the presence of elected officials in government whose views align with one's own views. Are elected officials maintaining their responsibility to the people—*are the representatives we elect addressing our needs? Do the representatives' political views align with ours? Or have we just elected yet another Congressperson who isn't going to pay any attention to us?*

Such is the issue I will be addressing in this design. Working through this design, I would like to change voting behavior so that, while before the design, many people didn't see a reason to vote, with the introduction of this design people will begin to see a reason to vote, thereby increasing their likelihood of voting. Voting behavior relates to the issue of political representation in that, when we vote, we are electing the officials that we trust will promote our welfare by passing legislation that improves our lives and furthers the subjective values and goals we have for our society. It can then be said that we, to some extent, control our political representation. By becoming more politically informed, and actually going to the polls to vote for the officials we think will cater most kindly to our

political interests, we thus act in such a way to foster the efficacy of our government. Voter turnout, thus, becomes a concrete, behavioral measure related to the more abstract, theoretical issue of political representation—and a means to evaluate the success of this design.

2. Description of the persuasive affordance

This design, entitled *Vote for Change*, will increase voter turnout by utilizing the persuasive affordance that "promote[s] understanding of cause-effect relationships," as the design will *"represent the non-immediate consequences of people's actions"* (Fogg 140). To explain how the design implements this persuasive affordance, and how the design will change voting behavior, a description of the design itself is in order.

This design takes the form of a website. Upon accessing this website, the user is prompted to enter their ZIP code so that the system can locate their respective Congressional representatives (both House and Senate). The system then presents the user with a survey, asking where they stand on a variety of general political, social, and economic issues—for example, *how do you feel about abortion? The death penalty? Welfare? The corporate tax rate?* With this information, the system then recalibrates, presenting the user with a series of visual statistics regarding each of these respective issues (e.g. "Abortion," "Death Penalty," "Corporate Tax Rate," etc.). The statistic will be a percentage representing the amount of times the representative's vote (on bills pertaining to this topic) has aligned with the user's subjective preferences, as said user indicated on the aforementioned survey. Next to this series of issue-focused, interactive visual statistics is a holistic meter rating the representative with a percentage encompassing the sum total of the number of times their vote has aligned with the user's political preferences. If the

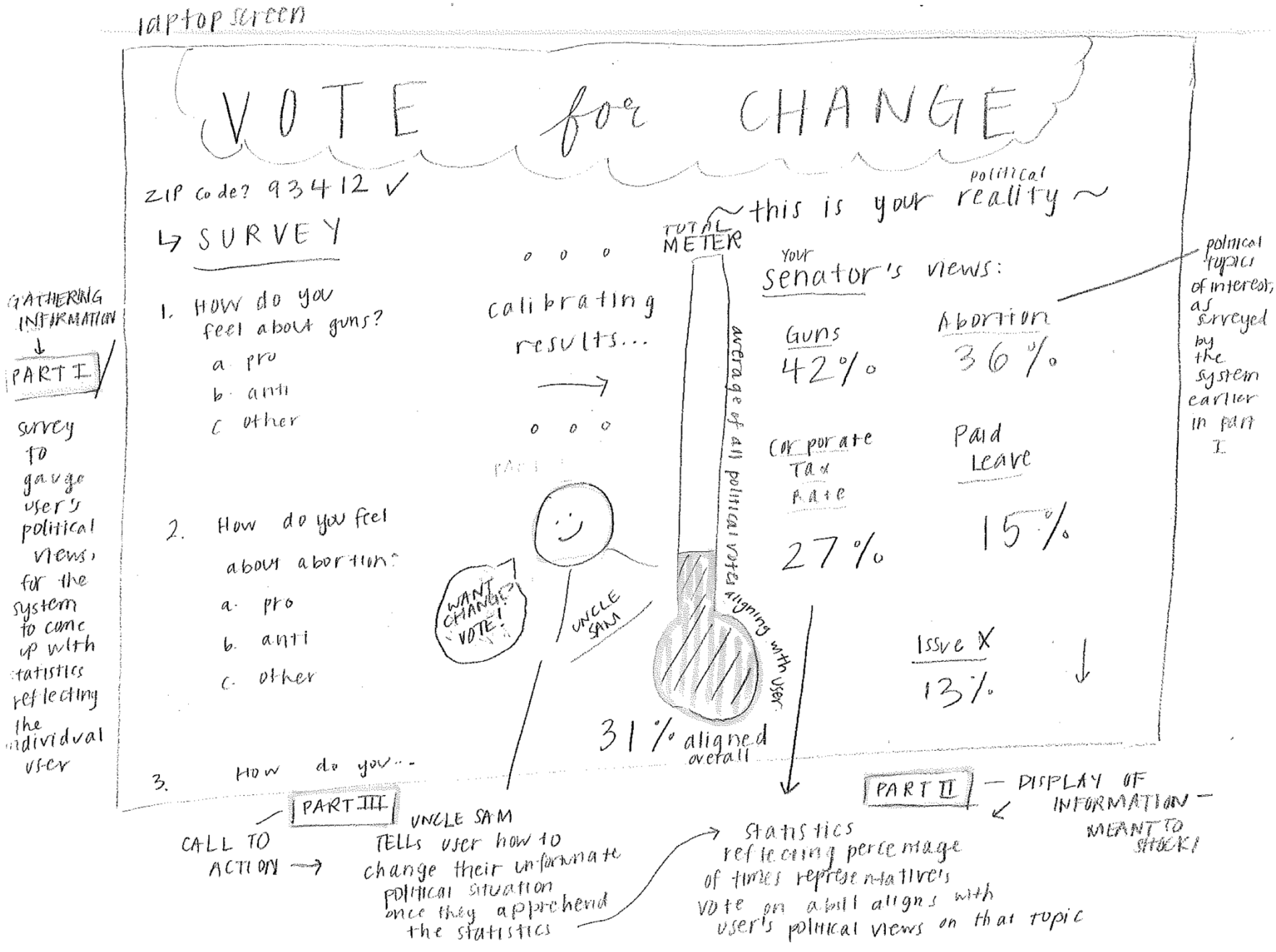
representative is in the "green zone" of the meter, their votes have largely aligned with the user's preferences—as you go down the meter, the color changes from green to yellow to red, indicating a related downward shift in the representative's votes' alignment with the user's preferences (the "red zone" indicating poor, near-nonexistent alignment). There will also be a little pop-up Uncle Sam animation that says: "Don't like what you see? Want a representative that better aligns with your political preferences? Then vote." The animation will provide the user with a link to get registered to vote and details about the upcoming election.

Thus it becomes clear how this design fosters comprehension of cause-effect associations, *"represent[ing] the non-immediate consequences of people's actions"* (Fogg 140). The design reveals the *effect*—poor representation of one's subjective political beliefs— that is *caused* when you decide not to vote. These consequences—that voting corresponds directly with whether or not the bills pertaining to the values and ideals you uphold, are passed—are not as obvious as they seem. For if you think closely about it, the association between voting and achieving the political results one desires is not so neatly evident. The decision not to vote is a short-term one—oftentimes, it does not take into consideration the very real fact that, if one does not vote, one forfeits their chance at helping elect a representative who actually aligns with their political views. The decision not to vote is not a long-term one: people who do not vote do not realize that, by voting, the chances of realizing the political successes they desire become more likely. They seem to forget that, by not voting, they could be indirectly helping elect a representative who does not represent their views. This design counteracts that mindset, providing users with the visuals to connect the "cause"—the behavior of voting— to the "effect"—the concept of

political representation. It does this by giving users a *reason* to vote by providing them with a clear image of the lack of representation of their political views that can result when they do not vote.

The core idea is that the user will see the statistics displaying the low alignment of their political views with those of their representatives and be shocked at how drastically their views contrast with those of their elected officials. Everyone wants to have their voice heard, their views represented. The design will show the user that this might not the case in the user's current reality, prompting said user to wonder how they can fix this devastating state of affairs. This is when the user is presented with the animated Uncle Sam telling them to vote. This aspect of the design thus presents to the user a direct link between a seemingly distanced "cause" and "effect"—the user will realize that there is a way to fix their dismal situation—and that way is by voting. Users will thus be endowed with a clearer understanding of this important political dynamic, and be more likely to vote in the next election.

3. Sketch of the interface


laptop screen
VOTE for CHANGE
ZIP code? 93412 ✓
↳ SURVEY
1. How do you feel about guns?
a pro
b anti
c other
2. How do you feel about abortion?
a. pro
b. anti
c. other
3. How do you...
calibrating results...
TOTAL METER
average of all political votes aligning with user
31% aligned overall
~ this is your political reality ~
your senator's views:
Guns 42%
Abortion 36%
Corporate Tax Rate 27%
Paid Leave 15%
Issue X 13%
political topics of interest, as surveyed by the system earlier in part I
WANT CHANGE? VOTE!
UNCLE SAM
GATHERING INFORMATION
PART I
survey to gauge user's political views, for the system to come up with statistics reflecting the individual user
PART III
CALL TO ACTION →
UNCLE SAM TELLS user how to change their unfavorable political situation once they apprehend the statistics
statistics reflecting percentage of times representative's vote on a bill aligns with user's political views on that topic
PART II — DISPLAY OF INFORMATION — MEANT TO SHOCK!

4. Effectiveness of the design—and potential pitfalls

Incorporating several key features of persuasive design as identified by design experts DiSalvo and Duncombe, this persuasive design, I believe, has a high likelihood of changing the voting behavior of individuals and thus attaining success. DiSalvo, in *Revealing Hegemony*, states that persuasive designs "both…document hegemonic conditions and…shape future…action…[through] unabashedly biased visual representations that work vigorously as provocations" (DiSalvo 43). This design follows DiSalvo's recommendation, as it demonstrates visually to the user a "hegemonic condition"—that condition being the absence of their values and opinions in government. By allowing users this exclusive window into the otherwise relatively obscured, troubling condition of their political representation, it moves them to, as suggested by the Uncle Sam animation, desire to change this reality, "shap[ing] [their] future...action"—in other words, it shapes their desire to vote in the next election. Thus the design acts as a catalyst, provoking them to alter their behavior to realize the change they wish to see in their world.

People are always searching to understand their world. This design responds to this desire. As Duncombe would say, it "conjure[s] [for the individual, an] image" of weak personal political fortitude—a striking image, to be sure, hard to come by without this helpful design to reveal it (Duncombe 222). Said image allows the individual to "make sense of the world," letting them grasp their dismaying political reality (Duncombe 222). After reviewing the statistics comprising the misalignment of their representatives' views with their own (that the website calibrates after they answer the survey on their political opinions), they grasp this dismal reality, and are moved to change it by voting in the next election. This design thus increases the likelihood that people will vote because it revives

in them their aspiration for political representation that reflects their respective interests—an aspiration, according to the design, they can realize if they vote.

However, there are drawbacks to this design. One of its potential pitfalls is that it might oversimplify the connection between political efficacy and voting, suggesting that by simply voting, one is sure to achieve the political representation they so desire. In so doing, it does not acknowledge higher-level, behind-the-scenes factors that might hinder accurate political representation—such as corruption—such that even if one votes, the political results aligning with their beliefs are not realized due to interfering third-party interests. Also, to political newbies, this design might reduce the concept of political participation to voting, stifling the arguable influence wrought by other mediums of political participation. And finally, if the *Vote for Change* program finds that the user's political views align with the representative they already have in office, it might insinuate to them that they do not need to vote—as there would appear to be no reason to, since the views of the user are already being represented. It thus potentially creates the conditions under which it can be used differently from intended, as, in this particular situation, instead of moving the user to vote, it could move them to abstain from voting.

Works Cited

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