

# **Pinning Down the Historical Significance of Button Collecting**

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## **Abstract**

*Political buttons were once a must-have item for any political hopeful running a campaign. For more than a hundred years, buttons have been used by many people and organizations to spread messages and gain support for a cause. This article aims to discuss not only the history of buttons but also the history they help to preserve. As a mass-produced item, buttons are an easy way to delve into the many movements and events that have become significant moments in the history of our nation and lives. However, since the turn of the century and with the technological boom that followed, the use of buttons has begun to fade. The purpose of buttons is evolving from large movements to smaller organizations and personal use, but their ability to encapsulate a small piece of history remains.*

Political buttons have been around from the earliest days of American politics when some of George Washington's supporters sewed specially crafted buttons onto their clothing to celebrate his inauguration and help identify themselves as belonging to a larger group. Although buttons and other pendants continued to be used throughout the 1800s, they remained small run items due to the high costs required to manufacture them. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that technological advancements led to a revolution in button making and made it possible not only to use buttons to reach the masses but for buttons to be used for a variety of other causes and reasons.

The main technology that would lay the groundwork for modern buttons came in 1868, when two brothers, John and Isaiah Hyatt, who was attempting to find a substitute for ivory in billiard ball manufacturing, created celluloid: the first commercially successful plastic. The next advancement did not come until 1893 when a Boston woman named Amanda M. Lougee filed a patent for covering a textile button with a thin layer of celluloid.<sup>1</sup> Although this button did not look like the modern campaign button, the idea being used was very important, and the patent was bought by the Whitehead and Hoag Company of Newark, New Jersey. The head of the company, Benjamin S. Whitehead, had worked on different forms of campaign memorabilia for years. Whitehead and Hoag not only acquired patents but also created their own, including one filed in 1896, which included the addition of a pin anchored to the back of the button in order to allow it to be easily attached and removed from clothing.

Combining both their own patents and the ones they had acquired, the Whitehead and Hoag company created what can clearly be seen as the forerunner of the modern political button, and the company saw great success as they were the main producer of buttons until their patents expired.<sup>2</sup> With these innovations, a cheaper and more quickly produced item was available. Candidates seized upon the opportunity that very same year, and both presidential hopefuls, William McKinley and William Jennings Bryan, made a variety of buttons for their campaigns.<sup>3</sup> Since then, buttons have become a mainstay of political campaigns as millions of buttons have been produced for thousands of different candidates. Buttons, however, have also grown out of this large initial primary use to become a cheap tool used by many groups and organizations trying to create identities, movements, and history.

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<sup>1</sup> Roger A. Fischer, *Tippecanoe and Trinkets Too: The Material Culture of American Presidential Campaigns 1828-1984* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 144.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Scarmuzzi, "McKinley first to use campaign pins to spread message," *Tribtoday*, accessed April 25, 2019, <http://www.tribtoday.com/news/local-news/2017/04/mckinley-first-to-use-campaign-pins-to-spread-message/>.

<sup>3</sup> Elizebeth King, "The Long Story Behind Presidential Campaign Buttons and Pins," *Time*, accessed April 10, 2019, <http://time.com/4336931/campaign-buttons-history/>.

Most people run into buttons throughout their everyday lives. Whether it is from crossing paths with people giving out buttons for an event or finding buttons from our past buried in the back of a drawer or attached to a backpack, most of us can think of a button we own or have seen, and some of us can recall the pain of being pricked by the pin on the back. Despite the fact that pin back buttons are a ubiquitous item in life, most people never think about their place in the world or what significance buttons might hold. Even from a scholarly standpoint, there is a great void in the discussion about what place buttons have in history and how they help us interact with it. The largest body of literature about buttons comes from collectors, and this is the first important accomplishment of collecting.<sup>4</sup> Were it not for the collecting world, there would be no robust documentation of the large variety of political buttons made each year. My goal in this essay is to discuss what I see as the three broad types of buttons and explore the historical significance of buttons and what they can teach us about history. By addressing the historical significance of buttons, we can also address the important role collecting has played in preserving these pieces of history.

For the purpose of understanding the ways in which buttons interact with history, I divide them into three different groups based on how they interact with history. The first group includes buttons from the past that interact with the present. These are buttons that can be used by people in the present to study past events. I use political buttons to represent this group. The second group includes buttons from the present that interact with the past. These buttons are ones specifically created so that they make the observer think about the past by referencing it whenever they are seen. I use the Middle Tennessee State University's (MTSU) Women's History month buttons to depict this group. The final group includes buttons that attempt to create their own history by instilling a sense of identity for a group or commemorating an event. For this group, I use the MTSU mini buttons.

### **Past Interacting with the Present**

Since their creation, pin back buttons have become an important part of politics and campaigning. Buttons are a great tool for displaying pictures of candidates, campaign slogans, and hot button issues.<sup>5</sup> Because of this, they are an excellent tool for understanding past campaigns: how the campaigns were run, what issues were important,

<sup>4</sup> Ted Hake, *Encyclopedia of Political Buttons, United States, 1896-1972* (New York: Dafran House, 1974); Theodore L. Hake, *Political Buttons, Book II 1920-1976* (York, PA: Hake's Americana & Collectibles, 1985); Jordan M. Wright, *Campaigning for President: Memorabilia from The Nation's Finest Private Collection* (New York: Smithsonian Books/Collins, 2008); Marc Sigoloff, *Collecting Political Buttons* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> A term that developed independently of pin back buttons during the 1960s and was used by advertisers to describe a desire that helps motivate consumers to choose among goods. Defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*.

and as, Dr. John Vile, a professor of political science, pointed out, “buttons can help in remembering the simple facts of a campaign like vice presidential candidates and the year a campaign took place.”<sup>6</sup> For many private collectors, this is one of the key reasons for starting and maintaining a collection—the ability to hold a piece of history. Although buttons cannot contain a multitude of information about a campaign, they can, as Mark Byrnes, the Middle Tennessee State University Provost, and Kent Syler, a professor of political science, put it, “be a great conversation starter”<sup>7</sup> and “spark an interest in campaigns.”<sup>8</sup>

Buttons also have multiple advantages over other forms of memorabilia that make them better suited for collecting and, therefore, a better source of the preservation of history. Buttons are durable, which means they are more likely to last, and they are made in large quantities, which means they are more attainable than things like posters or pieces of clothing. This abundance also means that most buttons are easily obtained for only a small fee. Buttons from campaigns that took place over a century ago, for example, can be purchased for as little as twenty dollars. Perhaps, the greatest benefit of campaign buttons is their size. Even a large collection of buttons can be displayed in a small amount of space, especially when compared to an item like campaign dolls—a campaign item utilized far more than you might think.<sup>9</sup>

Private collectors are not the only ones interested in political buttons. As I did the research for this paper, I was, on multiple occasions, steered towards the Albert Gore Research Center, a unit of the College of Liberal Arts at MTSU, which contains an archive of political papers and artifacts.<sup>10</sup> Upon entering the archives, I was surrounded by rows of large cabinets, and in each cabinet was drawer after drawer of political memorabilia. Some of these drawers contained only one or two buttons lying by themselves amidst other pieces of political memorabilia. Other drawers contained whole groups of buttons, some pinned to pieces of paper and others resting in tiny compartments of larger boxes filled entirely with buttons. As I looked through the drawers, the archivist, Donna Baker, and I discussed why the archive would want to dedicate so much space to buttons.<sup>11</sup> Although she agreed with the points raised by the other

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<sup>6</sup> John Vile (professor of political science and button collector) in discussion with author, April 2019.

<sup>7</sup> Kent Syler (professor of political science and former campaign manager) in discussion with author, April 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Byrnes (MTSU provost and professor of political science and button collector) in discussion with author, April 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Wright, *Campaigning*.

<sup>10</sup> “Albert Gore Research Center,” accessed April 25, 2019, <https://www.mtsu.edu/gorecenter/index.php>.

<sup>11</sup> Donna J. Baker (archivist) in discussion with author, April 2019.

people I interviewed, she also added that buttons allow us to study art history and the way in which imagery has been used in campaigns over time. She mentioned an exhibit, which was created in 2016 by the Al Gore Center and titled “Politics, Persuasion and Propaganda: Influence by Design,” that used buttons along with a variety of other pieces of political memorabilia to discuss this very point.

The artistic aspect of campaign buttons is an important part of the collecting world because collectors are typically drawn to more colorful and interesting buttons. As noted by Ted Hake in his *Encyclopedia of Political Buttons*, there was a downturn for buttons in the 1930s and 40s. Although many buttons were still being produced, the color scheme became almost entirely red, white, and blue, and the ability to acquire “attractive buttons” for collections was made difficult.<sup>12</sup> Buttons from this time period typically only contained the names or portraits of candidates; however, a small portion of buttons used humor or more complex imagery. Hake claims that the button revival of the 1960s changed these trends as the artistic and political revolution impacted the design and variety of buttons. Although I agree that the 60s and 70s made a clear contribution to the evolution of buttons, I think Hake is overlooking one of the root causes of the shift in how buttons looked.

During the 60s and 70s, button trends shifted with more and more buttons containing humor and a variety of images, although many buttons still used names and portraits. An artistic and political revolution is not the only cause of this change. In fact, the main event that started the evolution of buttons seems to be the runaway success of Dwight D. Eisenhower’s 1952 campaign slogan “I Like Ike.” In the lead up to the 1952 election, hundreds of different buttons were made for the Eisenhower campaign, many of which simply contained this easy and short slogan. The most famous of these buttons was a red, white, and blue striped button with “I Like Ike” printed in the middle. This button was so popular that the same style was used on dozens of different buttons, and each button used a different language ranging from Arabic to Yugoslavian. Slogan buttons were not a new idea; they had simply always been in the minority of buttons used by campaigns. But, upon seeing the popularity of a slogan button outshining the traditional portrait and name buttons, subsequent campaigns attempted to recreate this campaign’s success by pushing their own slogan buttons.

The 1960 election between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon saw both candidates attempting to create popular slogans. Kennedy had slogans like “Let’s Back Jack” and “Kennedy is the Remedy,”<sup>13</sup> while many of Nixon’s slogans attempted to use the nickname Dick in order to make him seem more approachable; this led to great slogans

<sup>12</sup> Hake, *Encyclopedia*, 6.

<sup>13</sup> White, *Campaigning*, 223.

including “They Can’t Lick Our Dick.”<sup>14</sup> Neither candidate’s slogans found the same success as Eisenhower’s. Both candidates appear to copy another button trend used by Eisenhower, making buttons that celebrated the first lady. Only one or two candidates had ever done this before Eisenhower—the 1940 Republican candidate, Wendell Willkie, who made one button that had a portrait of his wife and stating, “For First Lady Edith Willkie.” The Eisenhower campaign, on the other hand, made multiple buttons for first lady Mamie Eisenhower. These buttons were reminiscent of the president’s buttons but had a photo of the first lady. The campaign even made buttons with both the first lady and second lady, Pat Nixon, on them like the buttons that had both the president’s and vice president’s portraits. Nixon continued this trend during his campaign by having buttons depicting both he and his wife on them. The Kennedy campaign also had a button for Jackie Kennedy. As we have seen, buttons have given us an opportunity to observe how successful campaigns can impact future campaigns, and we can start to see how beneficial buttons can be to studying history. The buttons discussed also show another opportunity to study history given to us by button collecting—studying women’s history.

Although there are many buttons from the women’s suffrage movement, it is interesting to note that candidates in the 1916 election did not address the movement with their campaign buttons. This seems to be because both candidates intended to give women the right to vote.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, the candidates felt that there was a far more pressing subject to discuss, World War One. Although buttons for the election before the passing of the Nineteenth Amendment did not address women’s rights to vote, the 1920 election took some advantage of the fact that this was the first election in which women would be voting. Although the candidates attempted to woo women by giving out some memorabilia to them, most often small purses, only Warren G. Harding made a button for women. It was a simple yellow button with black lettering declaring “Under The 19th Amendment I Cast My First Vote Nov. 2nd, 1920.”<sup>16</sup> This lack of buttons oriented towards female voters, both leading up to and immediately after they gained the right to vote, would set a precedent for the following decades. Between 1920 and 1952, there is a lack of any type of button aimed towards female voters, or if there were, they are so scarce that they have not survived in great quantity. Eisenhower’s 1952 opponent, Adlai Stevenson, did not seem to make a button depicting his wife as the first lady, but he does seem to have made one of the first buttons directly aimed at female voters: a small white button depicting a high heel shoe and stating “Walk to Victory With Stevenson.”<sup>17</sup> Even

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<sup>14</sup> White, *Campaigning*, 225.

<sup>15</sup> Wright, *Campaigning*, 134.

<sup>16</sup> Hake, *Encyclopedia*, 106.

<sup>17</sup> Hake, *Encyclopedia*, 202.

after this button, it would not be until the button revolution of the 1960s and a heavy influence from the Women's Rights movement that we start seeing buttons for female voters. We can see a good example of this in the 1964 presidential race between Lyndon B. Johnson and Barry Goldwater when buttons were made that had slogans including "Ladies for Lyndon" and "Young Women's Republican Club of Goldwater." Some later buttons, like the 1972 McGovern button, even incorporated the female gender sign. McGovern's button simply had his name on the button, and the O was replaced by the female gender sign and an equal sign in the middle.<sup>18</sup> After the 70s, campaign buttons aimed exclusively at female voters became part of the norm and has continued to the present day.

Women's history is just one example of a subject that can be examined from the viewpoint of buttons. Views on minority representation, war, and even views on budgetary issues can all be looked at and studied through buttons. Buttons can also show, as noted by Mark Warda in *100 Years of Political Campaign Collectibles*, that issues of past campaigns share many similarities with modern issues and concerns.<sup>19</sup> In the very first campaign to use buttons, people used them to call for "sound money." Those same people would likely be terrified by today's national debt. Franklin Roosevelt's campaigns all revolved around social programs, issues like Free Healthcare and College are debated, something to which modern Americans can relate. Buttons can even be used to study the way that campaign operations change over time.

The 1930s and 40s were not the only button slump to occur. Multiple articles have come out over the past couple of decades, lamenting the decline of the campaign buttons.<sup>20</sup> Although buttons have always had an advantage on other forms of memorabilia, they cannot compete with the continued growth of T.V. advertisement, because many politicians feel that their campaign money is better spent towards media advertisement. Although buttons are a physical form of advertisement, they cannot reach as large an audience as television.

Some politicians have started using lapel stickers instead of buttons in order to be more cost-effective. Although stickers use similar methods as buttons to convey their message, they lack the durability of a button and, therefore, are less likely to be easily collected and saved as artifacts of history. Some have even pointed out that the continued production of buttons may only be occurring because of the collecting world; politicians

<sup>18</sup> Hake, *Book II*, 195.

<sup>19</sup> Mark Warda, *100 Years of Political Campaign Collectibles* (Clearwater, FL: Galt Press, 1996), 9.

<sup>20</sup> The Associated Press, "Are campaign buttons a thing of the past?: What politician wants to pull funds from T.V. for buttons?," *Charleston Daily Mail*, December 7, 1998; Brian Hicks, "Ideas that stick; An endangered artifact, the campaign button says it all," *The Post and Courier*, January 17, 2009.

want to appease this small group of people while at the same time creating a “legacy” item to cement their place in history.<sup>21</sup> This may very well be one of the biggest contributions made by collectors; their collecting has not only saved buttons from the past but has likely contributed to the continued use of buttons as a campaign tool. Buttons being made to appease collectors may have helped keep buttons alive long enough to see their purpose transformed into something new. As advertising becomes a bigger and bigger aspect of campaigning, buttons seem to be finding a new role to play. While buttons were once given away for free, many modern campaigns are starting to charge small fees for buttons or asking for donations when they hand them out. Buttons have become one of the best fundraising tools for the masses in order to pay the ever-ballooning cost of advertisements.<sup>22</sup>

Another thing to note is that the popularity of buttons varies with the popularity of the candidate. Although the past few decades have seen an evolution in the way buttons are used and a decline in their production, there have also been spikes in their popularity because of popular candidates and historical moments. The 2008 presidential election of Barack Obama is an excellent example of the boost that can occur because of the popularity of a candidate and people wanting to have a little piece of history.<sup>23</sup>

Political buttons are no longer the ubiquitous item that they once were, and although a popular candidate or slogan may boost the use of buttons for a particular year, the popularity of this piece of memorabilia has become far more unpredictable as time has gone on. Although the golden era of campaign buttons has passed, button collecting and its ability to interact with and preserve history is far from over. As the role of buttons changes, it makes it all the more important to look at the other two types of buttons and the role they have to play in interacting with history.

### **Present Interacting with the Past**

The benefits that make buttons a great tool for political campaigning can also make them a great tool for making a call directly to the history and historical figures. The buttons in my first example interact with history by becoming a part of it; the buttons in this second example interact with history by referencing it—buttons created for the present in order to connect to events or people from the past. The MTSU Women’s History Month buttons are a prime example of this. The oldest Women’s History Month button to be archived in the Albert Gore Research Center on campus is from 1989. It is

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<sup>21</sup> Kent Syler.

<sup>22</sup> Megan Kathleen, “Pushing Their Buttons: Presidential Campaigns Want Money For Something They Used To Give Away,” *Tribune Business News*, February 15, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> Paul Higgins, “Hot political buttons: Obama campaign prompts collector enthusiasm,” *Tribune Business News*, November 17, 2008; Audrey Parente, “THE OBAMA BOOST Historic presidency aids local shops,” *Daytona Beach News*, January 20, 2009.

a colorful green and teal button but seems to have simply been used to mark the occasion. However, two years later, someone realized the opportunity the buttons presented, and in 1991, the Women's History Month button marked the celebration by printing the portrait of a woman from history on it. The 91 buttons highlighted Prudence Crandall and, in addition to the image of Mrs. Crandall, her importance to history as the "Champion of Antebellum Black Education." Here, we start to see the call back to history being made as this button asked present observers to think about a woman from the past. The buttons were no longer simply an advertisement or conversation piece around an event but were now a conversation piece oriented around the women from history listed on the button. This style of focusing on one woman from history for each button has been used in every subsequent year, with the exceptions of 1993 and 1996 when three women's names appeared on the button instead: Mourning Dove, Zora Neale Hurston, and Kate Chopin for 1993, and Anne Dallas Dudley, Marry Church Terrell, and Sue Shelton White for 1996. The 1999 button was also used to mark the 151st anniversary of the women's rights movement and depicted an image of Lady Justice rather than a real woman from history. Even here, we can see the conversation being oriented around the women's rights movement. The use of the buttons, as a tool for a conversation about women in history, has continued to evolve.

One great improvement over time has been the artistic style of the buttons. The first buttons were typically two-toned, and although some contained one or two bright colors, many of them had simple white backgrounds. This has changed over the past two decades as more colorful backgrounds and bold patterns are being used. The image of Aretha Franklin on this year's button was surrounded by a colorful purple and green paisley, making the button even more eye-catching and effective.

The conversation starter has been taken even farther as the buttons now come attached to a small piece of paper, giving a brief history of the woman and the contributions she made to the world. We can see the same techniques being used here that we saw with campaign buttons. Portraits and bright imagery are used in the hope of getting someone to pick up the button and use it. Whether they collect only that year's button or try and collect one for each year, the buttons are on campus with the goal of creating a conversation about the past and how history has been achieved.

### **Creating a History**

Creating a conversation about history is not the only thing buttons can be used to create. They can be used to create a social identity, to create a trigger for memories, and by doing all of this, buttons can be used to create a history. On the MTSU campus, there are small 7/8-inch buttons whose sole purpose is to be collected. These buttons are

typically given out at events. Although these buttons are simply used to mark the event, in doing so, they help to establish that event in an individual's personal history with the button now becoming a tool for remembering that event and what took place in that individual's life. These buttons are attempting to commemorate the event, so it is better established and more easily recalled later. There are buttons like this for sporting events and on-campus activities, and the button creates a direct tangible connection for that person to the event in their past.

There are other collectible buttons given out by the different departments to their students. Many departments require that a student talk to a professor or declare their major in that department in order to obtain the button. These buttons are being used to form a small sense of identity. In the same ways that political buttons help to create a social identity around a political figure or party, these buttons help to create a social identity around a department or campus organization. Identity is an important aspect of both an individual person's history and an organization's broader history. The way in which the button is acquired and what the button depicts are components in creating this identity and history. Ultimately, the goal is to create a group in which the individual identifies with, and later in life will be able to recall. This is the simplest form of history. The button, again, also helps with this ability to recall because there is now a physical piece of evidence to trigger the memory or if the individual no longer has the button at the very least adds one more piece from the past for the person to remember and by doing so hopefully makes it easier.

### **Conclusion**

Buttons may be a small item to which many of us give little thought, but when one analyzes them and looks deeper into the ways in which they are used, it starts to become clear what role they have to play in helping create our history. Collecting buttons is an inextricably linked aspect of both creating this history and helping preserve it. We can use buttons from our past as evidence to help study our history and gain a better understanding of past events and people; we can use buttons to start conversations about people and events from history, and we can use buttons to help create our own history. Whether a person is actively collecting buttons from the past or simply saving a few from events in their life, every button has a story to tell and memories attached. At the end of the day, stories and memories are the foundation of history.

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