



Pinning Down Worth

Using key value factors to assess political campaign buttons.

By [Scott Lacourse](#)

Now that the presidential election process is in full force, it's a perfect time to discuss memorabilia that you may come across in a contents claim. Imagine that, as an insurance claims professional, you just hung up the phone with an affluent collector whose interest lies in a niche market: political buttons. Over time, this collector has acquired buttons of varying age, condition, and material, and she has asked you to do your best to appraise each item. Are you well versed enough in the valuation of these historical pieces to assess accurately the value of each button?

The first thing to know about political buttons is the name itself can be misleading. The actual buttons that resemble what are used today—a small plastic, circle-shaped pin you place on a lapel or blouse—were first introduced in 1896 as part of the William McKinley campaign for the presidency of the United States. Prior to this, “button” was not always the correct word to use in terms of these objects. More often these small political promotional tokens took the form of ribbons, coins, necklaces, and literally clothing buttons. The clothing button is where the political button originated and was first used at George Washington’s presidential inauguration in 1789.

It’s important to note that political buttons, their ancestors, and their modern alternatives all originated in the U.S. and to this day are mainly used in America. While an avid collector could obtain pieces dating back to the 18th century, these antique items would all be of American origin—a convenient piece of information to have when trying to ascertain the history of a specific button.

Another piece of information about political buttons is that the rarer the button is the more valuable it tends to be. Thus, a pin from President Obama's first state Senate race back in 1996 would be more valuable than an Obama 2008 button from his presidential campaign. In the same vein, a John F. Kennedy pin from his first race for a House of Representatives seat would fetch more than his presidential election campaign pin.

That isn't to say, however, that there aren't exceptions to this general rule. PoliticalParade.com, an online vendor of collectible political buttons and memorabilia, priced pins advertising Teddy Roosevelt's campaigns starting as low as \$28 and reaching as high as \$595. Similarly, odd pins such as "Republicans for Obama" may cash in more than a standard model featuring a candidate's face and/or slogan. From Eisenhower's campaign, an iconic "I like Ike" pin can be valued at \$30.00 or lower, but the one that includes the iconic phrase on a cartoon of a baby's bottom with the additional phrase "Time for a Change" may be worth more than twice as much.

Political Button Features

There are several different physical traits to examine when evaluating a political button. Foremost among them is the curl of a button. This portion is the rounded metal back piece that's connected to the plastic front and may display manufacturing information and even dates. Examining this area and its nuances is crucial to the evaluation process. The most common type of button, made of celluloid plastic casing over a metal back with a pin closure, dates back to as early as the late 1800s. It largely fell out of use in the 1940s but is extremely similar to pins manufactured today.

Before this, there were various other types of popular buttons or button equivalents. In the 1860s, a process called ferrotype became popular. This process was an early form of photographic development that was used to transfer candidate portraits onto pins, instead of using illustrations, for the first time. Ferrotypes were commonly used in the Abraham Lincoln presidential race.

Jugate buttons also were popular in the late 1880s and featured portraits of the candidate and his running mate next to each other or on opposite sides of the same pin. Trigate buttons showed three different candidates, typically in different races from the same party, and flasher buttons would switch between two images depending on how they were held. The latter came into politics in 1952 but are rarely manufactured in the modern era. Lithograph pins are similar to celluloid, except a different material covers the metal.

Then there are the oddities of the political button world. One type has a tab instead of a pin, where the item can be fastened to a shirt collar or pocket, similar to the verification of payment pins given to visitors of contemporary museums.

Older examples of political button alternatives include literal clothing buttons encased in metal or even metal covered in embroidered cloth, as well as various forms of jewelry. Necklaces with pendants featuring candidates' portraits as well as bracelets and tie pins with slogans and political party animals have been used throughout history.

Fabric was another popular choice of advertisement, especially in the early U.S. political system, and swatches of it were often worn with specific colors and patterns for different politicians. Another variation included buttons with portraits on them hung from ribbons similar in style to military decorations. In other cases, especially in the 1700s and early 1800s, political tokens that resembled coins could be found in lieu of objects physically attached to clothing.

Evaluating Political Buttons

The evaluation of political buttons is fairly straightforward since it's not difficult to determine whom the button supports and what it says or shows. With newer buttons, there's the added ease of checking the curl for further information. Some buttons were never made available to the general public and were instead intended only for members of a specific club or organization. Since these buttons are limited in availability, they can be more valuable. After determining these components, it's a matter of identifying the materials used to create the button and appraising the physical condition.

All political buttons and their variations can be assessed by the following key value factors:

- Information on the button's curl regarding date and manufacturer.
- The materials used.
- The candidate or candidates featured.
- The image and/or wording displayed.
- To what audience the button was distributed.
- The condition of the object.

Detecting Reproductions and Fakes

As with any type of collectible item, there are fake political buttons floating around among the real, valuable originals. The best way to distinguish between real and fake is to use the previously mentioned key value factors to determine the state and worth of a piece. Keep in mind that reproductions of political buttons are incredibly common—especially of popular and historically significant pins. “I Like Ike” is reprinted constantly on buttons because it has become a saying synonymous with the American political process and its use of slogans.

Likewise, pins featuring popular presidents such as Kennedy, the Roosevelts, and Reagan are reproduced frequently. Many reproductions state they are such on their pin curls, but fakes (often referred to as “brummagem,” meaning cheap or counterfeit in the political button collectors' community) will not.

The Incentive to Collect Political Buttons

Political button collecting is a hobby that has never gone out of style and actually has boomed in recent years. This may be due to the historic election of the first African-American president in 2008 spurring an interest in other important political moments in America. The increased popularity also could be partially motivated by television shows such as Public Broadcasting Service's “Antiques Roadshow” and History Channel's “Pawn Stars” that often feature political

buttons and explain their back stories. Whatever the reason, political button collecting is popular with people of all ages—retired veterans and interested youngsters alike.

The American Political Items Collectors is an organization founded in 1945 and claims to be one of the oldest groups of its kind in the country. This group has conventions to showcase member collections and to help determine the value of their pieces. Politics1.com also supports political buttons and memorabilia collecting. The site features a research library and a bookstore and helps people become involved with button collecting.

Discovering a rare or historically significant political pin not only can lead to thousands of dollars in profit when a sale is made, but it also can form a connection to a moment in America's history. In a way, holding a political ribbon emblazoned with George Washington's portrait can mentally transport one back to the birth and early days of our nation. Political buttons are valuable because they are important historical artifacts and symbolize events that shaped our modern era.