

Pushing Their Buttons

Presidential Campaigns Want Money For Something They Used To Give Away

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STARTING AT 14 with a button for Wendell Willkie, 83-year-old historian Don Coney of Newington has amassed a considerable collection of political memorabilia in the last 69 years. (MARK MIRKO / February 11, 2008)

By KATHLEEN MEGAN | Courant Staff Writer

February 15, 2008

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There was a day when you could walk into any candidate's headquarters and leave with a fistful of buttons — all for free — and the encouragement to pass them out to your friends.

Nowadays, unless you live in Iowa or New Hampshire — where the candidates can't afford not to be generous — you're far more likely to have to purchase campaign novelties like buttons, probably from a private vendor, often online.

Experts on the subject such as Larry Bird — the curator for the Smithsonian Institution's political campaign collection, not the basketball player — say this has to do with the emphasis on buying TV time.

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Political Buttons
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Andrew Jackson button Photo

"They would much rather put the money into television time, which is something they feel they can measure," said Bird. "There's a complete lack of understanding about campaign buttons. They are so used to polling, to focus groups — things you can measure."

The campaign button is hardly on the way out. Just check the candidates' websites and dozens of other vendor sites, and you'll see plenty of buttons.

But the button as a freebie seems to be on the decline — a situation that

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Bird and other button aficionados and plenty of ordinary people find strange, given the willingness of the populace to be walking billboards for one candidate or another.

"If I was Barack Obama, I would want to see my button everywhere it could be, and I wouldn't charge money for it," said Bird. Handing out a button or any other campaign paraphernalia is "really a symbol of activism and engagement in the way that a television spot is not.

"If you can get someone to wear your buttons, it's better than getting someone to watch your commercial and that should be your goal."

Reid Cherlin, Connecticut communications director for Obama, said, shortly after the Feb. 5 Super Tuesday, the campaign typically charges for buttons because there is such high demand. (A check of the

Obama website showed that many of the campaign buttons are back-ordered.)

"Otherwise, we would be producing an endless supply of buttons," he said. "This is just a way for us, when we are competing in 22 states, to try and control the expense."

However, he said the campaign wouldn't turn someone down if he can't afford a button, a bumper sticker or a yard sign. "We have a suggested contribution that helps us produce more of these materials," Cherlin said.

He said he wasn't sure when campaigns started charging for buttons, but it pre-dates the dawning of the Internet/YouTube era.

"However, people do love the buttons, we love the buttons and we wish we had enough that we could give as many as everyone asks for," said Cherlin. On the other hand, buttons that go directly into someone's personal collection don't help the campaign, he said.

At the Clinton campaign, Brian DeAngelis, the communications director in New Haven, said that the campaign hands out buttons free to volunteers for as long supplies last. Buttons can also be purchased online. (Clinton's website did not show any back-ordered buttons; all seemed to be available now for order.)

Several calls to John McCain's national headquarters in Virginia were not returned.

Betsy Storm, an Obama volunteer from Illinois, said she bought 200 campaign buttons which she has been handing out to people when they ask.

"It's the best way to engender conversation about a candidate, to give you a chance to talk to people about your candidate. It creates buzz and conversation," she said. "Funny, it's such a low-tech thing in a high-tech world. It's nice, with buttons, you don't need a password."

Why do we love campaign buttons? Wayne Fields, director of American culture studies at Washington University, says it's less about the candidate and more about ourselves.

"The buttons we wear are statements for the candidates, but we wear them because they are statements about us," said Fields. "They show that we have opinions and rights to our opinions and we don't care who knows them. ... It's about individualism as much as it's about party loyalty We are advertising for ourselves."

Campaign buttons are also part of the "circus atmosphere" that has always infused American politics, said Fields. "You have parades, balloons and enthusiastic celebrations, and buttons are a part of the color of it. They go along with all the bunting and the ticker tape."