

TEACHER GUIDE

1940 DOC. #2: Willkie-Roosevelt Button Collage

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

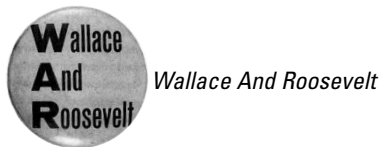
Like FDR, Wendell Willkie was something of a media star. Although he had achieved wealth as a Wall Street lawyer and utilities executive, his fame came primarily from his exposure in the mass media of his day. His speeches on radio led to his profile on a “March of Time” newsreel. In April of 1940 he appeared on the radio quiz show, “Information Please.” Long before Bill Clinton appeared on MTV, Wendell Willkie and Franklin Roosevelt were using the mass media to campaign by showmanship.

Radio was not the only contested ground in this election. The title of the 1940 campaign could have been “The Battle of the Button” because more campaign buttons were ordered—54 million—than at any time before or since. The Willkie campaign led in the button battle with 33 million buttons distributed by half-a-million members of Willkie Clubs. Willkie supporters even printed up a button that claimed, “100 Million Buttons Can’t Be Wrong.” In contrast, FDR had only 21 million buttons issued supporting his candidacy.

The buttons were cheap and easy to make, simply stamped out from lithographed tin sheets. They contained all sorts of messages. Some were funny, some were sarcastic, and some were downright vicious. They helped to make the 1940 election a favorite for presidential memorabilia collectors.

> **Project** the button collage and have pairs of students answer the questions and then present to the class, or discuss each button as a class.

QUESTION **Which candidate does the button support and what is the campaign theme addressed by the button?**



SUGGESTED ANSWER Willkie

THEME “WAR,” suggesting that Roosevelt would get the nation into war

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Willkie-Roosevelt Button Collage

PowerPoint Slide



THINK. Hitler nominated Hitler, Mussolini nominated Mussolini, Stalin nominated Stalin, Roosevelt nominated Roosevelt. Do You Want a Dictator?

SUGGESTED ANSWER Willkie

THEME By seeking a 3rd term, Roosevelt is acting like a dictator



Friendly Dependable Resourceful

SUGGESTED ANSWER FDR

THEME Roosevelt's good character and personality



I'm Against the 3rd Term. Washington Wouldn't, Grant Couldn't, Roosevelt Shouldn't

SUGGESTED ANSWER Willkie

THEME the precedent against a 3rd term



Willkie for the Millionaires, Roosevelt for the Millions

SUGGESTED ANSWER FDR

THEME working-class support for Roosevelt and the New Deal



A Third Term is Better than a Third Rater

SUGGESTED ANSWER FDR

THEME FDR's competence and Willkie's lack of experience makes a 3rd term acceptable

ADDITIONAL INFO

Willkie's financial support came from newspaper publishers and corporate businessmen who had opposed Roosevelt from the start. The majority of Willkie buttons expressed opposition to the third term.

Most of the buttons for this campaign were slogan buttons rather than the picture buttons that had been common previously. More than 2,000 styles of buttons were produced for this single election. In addition to buttons, this campaign saw lots of license plate attachments as well as inexpensive paper posters and stamps. Together, both parties provided a substantial cottage industry for campaign novelties over the course of this election season.

CONNECTIONS
(see thematic listing)

Attack
Class/Labor
Reaching Voters (buttons)

FURTHER QUESTIONS

What makes buttons so common and useful as campaign devices?

Compare the use of buttons, TV commercials, direct mail pamphlets, and the Internet as means to get votes. Which media work best in your estimation and why?