



Election Collection

An attorney's hobby reveals a rich history of U.S. politics.

ERIC BEHRENS FONDLY RECALLS THE 1964 PRESIDENTIAL RACE BETWEEN INCUMBENT PRESIDENT LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON AND SEN. BARRY GOLDWATER, in which he voted during a mock election in his kindergarten classroom in Kansas City, Missouri. “That was the first campaign I was aware of,” Behrens said. “Of course, we were all voting according to what our parents were doing.”

Now a shareholder in Graves Dougherty Heaton & Moody, Behrens is still fascinated with elections, which is quite obvious if you step inside his downtown Austin office. There, hundreds of political campaign buttons—from black and white images on tin of Ulysses S. Grant

and James Garfield to modern graphics supporting Barack Obama—are framed neatly for display. Iconic slogans—think “I like Ike” on a red, white, and blue background—are also present. Viewed together, the amalgam of witty and serious pins from through the decades offers a look at the country’s continually evolving moods and hotbed issues.

“Any time someone comes to my office and sees the frames on the wall, that’s where they stop,” Behrens said. “Someone will see a candidate from a campaign when they were younger that was kind of a pivotal time for them in terms of becoming interested in politics.”

Behrens’s extensive collection, which includes thousands of pieces in total, has modest roots. As a child, he liked the Franklin D. Roosevelt campaign memorabilia his grandfather had saved. “He wasn’t consciously collecting, but he would just keep buttons.” Eventually, the items were passed down to Behrens. He added materials from the 1968 Humphrey-Nixon campaign and then started working back in time.

During the earlier stages of his hobby and before the popularization of online shopping, Behrens had a local museum curator attend trade shows to pick up buttons on his behalf. As technology advanced, websites devoted to trading political memorabilia increased—and so did his assortment of voter relics.

Some campaign enthusiasts have an affinity for one political party over another, a set of pins from a specific year, or elections with local or personal ties. Behrens, too, looks for a few key things in the items he collects. First, he wants buttons that are official campaign materials. He also seeks quirky slogans that stand out in a sea of patriotic donkeys and elephants, as well as designs from special interest groups and rare situations. One of his favorite examples is an early 1950s anti-Harry Truman pin produced by Adlai Stevenson—a member of Truman’s own party.

His oldest button is a ferrotype, created by coating a negative image on a thin iron plate, from Abraham Lincoln’s 1860s campaign. And he has a button from each successful presidential candidate since that election. Still, his most unique find is from the 20th century: an Earl Warren button that features an orange as a backdrop. “In all the years I’ve been collecting, that’s the only one I’ve seen like it.”

Above: Eric Behrens has amassed hundreds of political campaign buttons, many of which are on display in his Austin office.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERIC BEHRENS

Reflecting decades of politics, Behrens's collection includes memorabilia from both early and current U.S. elections.

While Behrens continues to add more historic pieces to his collection (he's currently on the hunt for a Tippecanoe and Tyler Too pin), he looks forward to the flood of buttons with new election cycles—particularly the “dream team” items that are produced as candidates announce their plans to seek office and pundits speculate running mate matches.

“I haven't really started looking yet, but they'll be fun,” he said.

Regardless of affiliation or history, Behrens enjoys the personal connections that campaign pins bring. “You see folks on the street or in town wearing a button for their favorite candidate,” Behrens said. “It's an American tradition.” HANNAH KIDDOO

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