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# Distributed Media in the Age of Eisenhower: Political Buttons

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# Distributed Media in the Age of Eisenhower: Political Buttons

## **Abstract**

This paper describes the purpose and effectiveness of distributed campaign materials in the context of President Dwight D Eisenhower's 1952 and 1956 elections. It analyzes campaign buttons and political cartoons distributed by the Eisenhower administration to determine how they furthered the image Eisenhower wished to convey during his campaigns. This image is presented by applying certain aesthetic qualities to the campaign materials.

## **Keywords**

Political Buttons, Eisenhower, Dwight D. Eisenhower, presidential campaign, symbolism, 1952, 1956

## **Disciplines**

American Politics | Anthropology | History | Political History | Political Science | Social and Cultural Anthropology | United States History

## **Comments**

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Professor Hendon

Bringing The Past Into The Present

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### Distributed Media in the Age of Eisenhower: Political Buttons

This paper is about the purpose and effectiveness of distributed campaign materials. Because this is a broad topic, I introduce them in the context of President Eisenhower's 1952 and 1956 elections. Why do candidates for public office bother distributing physical materials to constituents when digital media can be transmitted to millions at the same time over the television or radio? Admittedly, Eisenhower did run multiple TV campaign ads, In fact, Eisenhower's 1952 campaign was the first time that television ads played a big role in a campaign (UVA miller center). Despite his electronic success, campaign buttons were still an integral part of his campaign, and the slogan I Like Ike became a household phrase. From a voter perspective, is there something more personal about receiving an item on behalf of a candidate? From a candidate's perspective, does seeing the people's willingness to wear badges representing you demonstrate more rallied support than just a television network simply running your commercial for profit? If the answer to that question is yes, it certainly makes a case for why Eisenhower utilized physical campaign materials so extensively. But the success of Eisenhower's campaigns did not solely come from the fact that he distributed physical materials; his opponent Adlai Stevenson did so as well. It was the nature and content of these materials that proved so wildly successful. Distributed materials contain symbolism that is meant to convey various ideas and feelings. This symbolism can come from font, color, or even shape of the material in question (Eliassen). Also, an

object's simplicity or intricateness indicates important things about the artist or subject. People do not create things simply to create; there is always a message to be conveyed, especially when there is a campaign to be won. But why buttons? Why didn't Eisenhower pour the money used for button manufacturing into making more of his wildly successful television or radio ads? What is the goal of distributing this type of media (buttons) versus another?

By establishing the purpose of various campaign materials, analyzing the goals of Eisenhower's campaign, and examining the materials "Ike" and his team produced, I have distinguished how distributed materials helped further Eisenhower's campaign goals based on the historical purpose of those types of materials in themselves.

### **Artifacts**

I examined three items within Special Collections at Gettysburg College which pave the way for this connection. Two political campaign buttons, and one comic book. I analyzed a red, white, and blue political button from Eisenhower's 1952 campaign. The button showcases the phrase "I Like Ike" on the front face. I also refer to a 1956 button with the words "I'm wit choo Ike". The comic book I analyzed is from Ike's 1956 campaign, and is different from the buttons in that in being a piece of literary material, it has the opportunity to mention Ike's issues as a presidential candidate, where the political buttons are simply meant to demonstrate the wearer's allegiance.

Each of these artifacts claims a different significance to my goals for this project. The I like Ike button demonstrates why campaign buttons are useful tools in a campaign: their small size and ability to be designed helps capture the essence of a campaign in something wearable. The "I'm wit choo Ike" button demonstrates the

permeating abilities of political buttons. Controversy and bluntness spark conversation, which provides an opportunity for the button's wearer to explain their political position, thus spreading the influence and message of the candidate they support. While the statement "I'm wit choo Ike" itself does not cause people to question the button, the way the message of support is conveyed is controversial. Few presidents, or any public figure of esteem for that matter, would use support material with such informal language. The cartoon demonstrates the power of glittering generalities to inspire people to feel a certain way about a candidate. While this particular publication does deal directly with issues, namely Eisenhower's decision to remove troops from the war, the theme of "Eisenhower is great because he helps the American people" still runs rampant within.

The famed "I like Ike" button is extremely important because the phrase was Eisenhower's unofficial campaign slogan. Various objects donned the phrase, from buttons, to shirts, to the very hat Eisenhower wore! But, this specific style of button was distributed on a very broad scale. It is a circle an inch and a half in diameter. The back is light gray metal, tarnished with black rust, likely due to age. It is tarnished most severely on the raised upper outer ring, likely because that part presses against the garment of the wearer, while the concave inside remains untouched. The fastener is safety pin style attached to the button by an inside metal disk and protrudes through two one-third in diameter holes in the back of the outer metal circle. The needle is a long thin piece of metal bent in a circle at the end so it can close back into its upside down hooked shape eye. The side view of the button reveals the phrase, stamped in white into the red section, "Product of Emress Specialty Co." and N.Y.14.N.Y. The front face is a colored plastic. It appears that it was a slightly larger circle than the metal it now

covers, and then upon manufacturing, the plastic was pressed around the smaller disk and crimped in around the metal, creating a sort of rippled effect on the back. This front face is split in three parts with thin horizontal lines, with the middle section much larger than the top or bottom. The top section is a dark blue, the middle an off white (likely due to age) and the bottom third is a bright red. Inside the white middle section, along the top in small capital letters is penned "I LIKE", in red. Directly below it, in the same basic uniformly wide font but about eight times larger, is the word "IKE" in blue. The spacing of the words is uniform, with four millimeters between each letter. I found this notable, considering the stark contrast in font size between the first and second lines of text.

Another button involved in Eisenhower's campaign displayed the phrase "I'm wit choo Ike". This button is much smaller, with a diameter of a little under an inch. The back is a metal copper ring painted silver. The silver on the raised ring that rubs against the wearer's clothes is tarnished to display the copper underneath the silver paint. This ring has a lip that comes in to the center of the button. This lip keeps the copper ring (not painted silver since it is concealed in the button) that holds the needle pin in place. The pin on this button is just a single straight needle, and it does not have a hook to fasten to, it is supposed to pierce the garment and is angled in a fashion that no more security is needed. This contrasts to the other button, which is slightly bigger. Perhaps, the lack of weight in this second button permitted the manufacturers to use a less sophisticated fastening mechanism. The inside metal disk below the copper ring is a shiny metal, not painted. It appears to be aluminum. The front of the button is colored paper covered with a thin sheet of clear plastic. Similar to the other button, it appears that the paper and plastic circles were larger than the metal, and a machine or worker cinched them around the metal backing to fasten them, leaving a ridged look visible only

from the back of the button. The design on the front looks much like an eye. The middle section is white and extends all the way to the sides without ever becoming pointed. The top and bottom sections are red and mimic top and bottom eyelids in that they are rounded and come to points at the sides of the button. The middle white section has the phrase, written in all capital letters "I'M WIT CHOO IKE", in dark blue.

In addition to political buttons, political cartoons also played an important role in conveying Eisenhower's campaign ideas in 1952, as well as establishing his credibility in his 1956 reelection. In particular, one political comic book entitled "Forward With Eisenhower-Nixon: Lets continue Peace...Prosperity...Progress" outlines Eisenhower's promises in a series of captioned cartoons, and then addresses how he came through on those promises during his first term. The comic book was distributed by the Republican national, congressional, and senatorial committees, all based in Washington D.C. The chairmen involved in its production were Leonard W. Hall, Senator Andrew F. Schoepel, and House Representative Richard M. Simpson. The front cover is a red orange at the top, and is a downward ombre to the bottom side, which is white. The title is in the top left corner, with the left side down and angled 20 degrees. Directly below the words are color portraits of Eisenhower and Nixon that consume the top half of the cover. Eisenhower is wearing a green suit, and his wrinkles are drawn very obviously. His brow is slightly furrowed. He bears a closed mouth smile, and has a generally friendly, yet stern look about him. To his right, Nixon is wearing a purple suit and looks far less friendly. His lips are pursed closed, his expression straight across. As a younger man, he has fewer wrinkles, but his jawline and upper lip are sculpted by the artist. His eyebrows are drawn to bleed into the shadows caused by them, masking his eyelids

and giving a much darker look to his face. He does not appear mean, just particularly stern.

Immediately below these busts are caricatures of four marching people: three men and one woman. All four of the people are in shape, and although their faces lack the detail of Eisenhower and Nixon's, they all appear to be moderately attractive people, and none of them are disabled or irregular in any way. The first man all the way to the left, who we later find out is Jim Turner, is wearing a red suit and toting a briefcase. His lips are pursed like Nixon's and he appears to be a very professional, important man. To the right is a man wearing tan coveralls, named Pete Markey. He carries himself with his elbows out, and has a more imposing look than any of the others. He is wearing a tan baseball cap to match his coveralls. He is smiling with teeth as he marches along, out of step with Jim. The next person on the cover is Ann Turner. She has an almost impossibly thin waist, is wearing high heels, and a cinched apron. She has short curly brown hair pulled back for a look of sophistication. Her apron has a low-cut V-neck, but she is wearing a petal pink button down short sleeve shirt underneath the white apron that falls just below her knees. She is much shorter than the three men, yet still carries herself with her shoulders up and back, exuding an aura of confidence, complete with a pink lipstick smile, in step with her husband Jim. The last man on the cover is Sam Ross. He is roughly the same height as the other two men, and is wearing light blue denim overalls that end at his ankles. Underneath is a white button down shirt rolled up to his mid bicep. He is wearing a yellow straw hat. He is smiling, and appears generally relaxed, with his hands resting on his backside, leaning slightly back. He is in step with Pete Markey (Hall et. al).

The comic details the story of the four (presumably fictional) characters from the cover: a Korean War veteran named Jim Turner, a working class ex-democrat named Pete Markey, Jim's wife Ann Turner, and a Farmer named Sam Ross. An old man is trying to write an election editorial, and calls upon the stories of four people he knows, told in their first person, to do so.

Jim Turner was a Korean War veteran who was injured in Korea in 1952 due to Truman's so called police action. He heard that Ike made a campaign promise to come to Korea, and upon deliverance of that promised, was eternally grateful he ended the war and that Jim was able to return home to his parents (Hall et. al). The rest of his section discusses Eisenhower and Nixon's successes in making peace without giving a single inch to foreign powers. Notable quotations from the section are "Before--The Russians used to keep yelling 'Peace', but the split second you relaxed, they'd grab another piece of the world's real estate... After-- Ike was in the White House, the free world hasn't lost a single inch of land to the Soviet Russians" and "Those cheers... that hope... will be sort of nudging my hand when I pull the lever for Ike and Dick and a Republican Congress on November 6th" (Hall et. al).

Pete Markey's story is a discussion of how he used to be a Democrat, but as a working class man, he has a bank balance and has been paying into his pension all his life. But, after years of voting Democrat and seeing inflation rise, that financial security was rapidly disappearing. Upon the realization that Democratic involvement in wars leading to inflation was the cause of this distress, he became an advocate for the Republican platform. Notable quotations are "More people are employed today [under Eisenhower and Nixon] than ever before!" and "Our take-home pay has hit an all-time high-- a lot more than we ever had under the Democrats with their wars" (Hall et. al).

Ann Turner begins by thanking Ike for his wedding present to her and Jim: Jim's ability to come home to her alive so they could get married! She then reiterates the importance of halting inflation. The most notable thing in this section is the ballot she draws up. It has issues set apart for Republicans on the left, and Democrats on the right. Each issue leads up to a square checkmark box. Highlights on the Republicans side include: Peace, Inflation Halted, Balanced Budget, and Honesty & Integrity. On the Democrats side, she lists War, Highest Taxes in History, Corruption & Scandals, and Wars to solve Unemployment (Hall et. al).

Lastly, Sam Ross glows about Ike's farm legislation, stating that Ike is a scrapper: fighting for the whole country. Notable quotations include "The Democrats in control deliberately delayed and stalled... [finally passing] a bill that wouldn't solve our long-run farm problems" and "[Ike] puts the nation's interests above politics" (Hall et. al).

## **Analysis**

This set of cartoons appeals directly to pathos, as the cartoonist employs the use of beaming civilians paired with glowing captions regarding their respective praises of Ike. This publication shows another side of Eisenhower's distributed materials. Where buttons are meant to be worn to publicly advertise one's support for a candidate, Publications are meant more to persuade. This cartoon book in particular attempts to persuade readers to back Ike based on his character. While the issues are mentioned, the more important emphasis is how Ike delivered on those promises. The most notable thing about the comic was the four characters on the bottom of the front cover, and what they represent. These four United States citizens are all from different walks of life. One is an esteemed war veteran turned successful businessman. Another is a simple

laborer. Still another is a middle class woman. The last is a farmer who lives secluded from the bustle that the other three endure. But, there on the cover, pictured directly below a beaming Ike and a confident looking Nixon, are those four Americans marching together: the first in step with the third, and the second with the last. These four people with very different experiences are united in support of Ike, because Ike was the president for the people. This main purpose begs an interesting set of questions. Why is the cartoonist focusing mainly on the integrity and Americanism of Eisenhower? Surely, this is not the only important trait of a president. Though, he does do a good job at mentioning the political and military gains of Ike to bulk up his argument for integrity.

The ever-famed “I Like Ike” button has been branded as the most wildly successful campaign button design in the history of the American presidency (Powers). This may be a shock, as at first glance, there is nothing terribly notable about the button. There is no snarky phrase to give it controversial appeal, no elaborate or beautiful picture, no bells and whistles. But it is in the fact that this button lacks all of those things that it was such a wild success, especially in the context of Dwight D Eisenhower, or as he preferred to be called: “Ike’s” campaign. In order to effectively discuss the importance of this particular button in Eisenhower’s campaign, the audience must also understand the role campaign buttons typically play in elections, not specifically Eisenhower’s. What is the goal of distributing this type of media versus another?

### **Background on Buttons**

Buttons came into the political spotlight as soon as campaigns for the office of President began. Although they were not the now famed metal disks with a pin on the

back, these ribbons and pins celebrated the inaugurations of the first four presidents. Now, it is important to note that these were celebratory buttons, not persuasive ones. They were essentially commemorative keepsakes, designed to show support for a candidate who had already won. In contrast, the campaign button did not emerge until Andrew Jackson's presidential race in 1828. This was considered the "birth of the common man", and the constituency was heavily invested in promoting their candidate of choice. As buttons became more popular in the 1840's and 60's, they took on a dual purpose of fashion and functionality. These buttons were actually more like medallions, and were decorative when worn on a lapel or sweater. These buttons, while still not yet the type of button we envision today, backhandedly had the purpose of electing a candidate (blurred by the goal of fashion). While modern buttons continue to make a statement, the vast majority of them are not manufactured to be like jewelry. They continue to make a statement, but that statement is now solely political and no longer fashionable. This is supported by the aforementioned Eisenhower buttons, as they were circular plastic discs with a simple design, but a powerful message. In this way, the buttons I analyzed in this paper are drastically different from the ribbons and medallions sent out by early celebratory campaigns after a successful election.

Political buttons used to be distributed by national campaign efforts. This was especially true of President Eisenhower's 1952 campaign, bearing the slogan "I like Ike" but, since then, the popularity and mass production of political buttons have plummeted. They are no longer distributed on the large scale by a party's national committee, but rather by privatized companies on a much smaller scale. What caused this grand shift in the allocation of campaign funds directly by a candidate and their committees? Many attribute the transition to the popularization of broadcast media following Eisenhower's

presidency, specifically television. In their minds, every dollar spent on manufacturing a political button for one American citizen to wear is a dollar forgone on producing a commercial that can be viewed by a much larger group of the constituency simultaneously (NPR).

However, this shift in national focus has not eradicated the political button completely. There is still a large group of citizens who prefer to show their political allegiance on their lapels rather than just nod approvingly along to a commercial in the comfort of their own homes. As noted by Mort Berkowitz, a political button distributor since 1976, “when you walk down the street, a lot of people like to identify themselves: who they are, who they support and you can't do that on twitter” (NPR). This has kept the market for political button production open for privatized companies. Berkowitz's company specifically produces a slew of edgy buttons, displaying slogans such as “Yes We Can Bankrupt America” (in support of Romney/Ryan in 2012) or “I'm not a binder, I'm a woman” (referencing Romney's attempt to demonstrate his commitment to hiring female government employees by stating that he has “Binders of Women” in his office (NPR). Needless to say, this button is in support of Obama in the fact that it is anti-Romney/Ryan). Berkowitz's business, Bull Concepts, has been a huge success since its birth, likely due to its refusal to be tamed, censored, or politically correct. You would think that this would turn off politically active constituents, and for many, it probably does. But think about it. What kind of person feels the need to display their political allegiance on their jacket or bag? Someone heavily involved, who wants you to ask about it. People willing to broadcast their political allegiances are as bold as these buttons, so this is why Berkowitz's company has been such a wild success. Buttons set up a forum to discuss political ideology with family, friends, and even random passers-

by. Because of a button's small size, only a few words will fit, causing them to be blunt - just the way many Americans like them.

Though Eisenhower was wildly successful in his use of buttons, he also found success in broadcasting short ads over television, showcasing his "plain talk, reassuring smiles, and heroic image" to the constituency all at once using technology (UVA). Eisenhower campaigned in the mid 1950's, which was the time of television's rise. The fact that Eisenhower did produce campaign ads to be viewed on television does not negate the idea that buttons were an important part in Eisenhower's campaign, because of the nature of the ads produced. Eisenhower's ads were roughly thirty seconds long, which supports the idea that conciseness was very important to Eisenhower: a huge factor in the decision to implement buttons on a wide scale basis. Campaign buttons, because of their small size, can only carry a small amount of information. The same can be said of short television advertisements. Eisenhower's decision to use both mediums of persuasion on the same campaign illustrates the point that political buttons are an effective way to convey small snippets of information.

### **Political Climate**

Why political buttons were implemented so heavily in Eisenhower's campaign can be better understood by examining the political context of the preceding period. By examining the political ongoings leading up to his campaign and how Eisenhower's ideals interacted with past political decisions, we can gain a greater understanding as to why Eisenhower campaigned in the fashion that he did.

For the twenty years preceding Eisenhower's presidency, America was led by Democratic presidents: Franklin Delano Roosevelt from 1933-1945 and Harry Truman

following Roosevelt's death in 1945 (Coenen et.al). Roosevelt entered the presidency during the Great Depression with the task of pulling the country out of it. He succeeded in that effort through the implementation of a series of government programs known as the New Deal. The New Deal was aimed at joining together as a country to overcome the economic disparity created by the depression, to create jobs, and to provide assurance to our needy members of society, whether they be old, poor, or handicapped. This set of programs was enacted largely with the help of executive orders. During his twelve years in the White House, Roosevelt enacted 3721 Executive Orders, more than double that of any other president to date (Peters). Admittedly, he did have the longest White House career, but he still has the largest amount of average executive actions per year in office, averaging to 307 per year (Peters). The New Deal was wildly successful, which harbored a lot of support for the Democratic Party. The New Deal Coalition, which was a set of interest groups who supported the New Deal helped establish the Democratic Party as the dominant party of the time. FDR's approval ratings in his Post New deal presidency ranged from 59% approval to 84% approval, with 72% of the constituency agreeing with his decisions in office up to his death (Roper). Roosevelt was a tough act to follow for Truman, who, as Roosevelt's Vice President at the time of his death, became President in 1945. But Democratic Party support wavered in 1945 with the end of World War II and although Truman won the 1946 election, it was an upset over Republican Thomas Dewey (Coenen). Truman's ratings showed a consistent decline, with his average approval rating during his first term at 55.6% and his second term average at 36.5%. When he left office in 1952, his approval was a mere 22%, the lowest Gallup poll approval rating in history (Gallup). These poor ratings were largely a result of the American people's desire to revert to

isolationist foreign policy, since we had just exited the World War II after dropping two bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Truman was President when the Korean war started, which chances were looking grim at any success coming out of the war when he left office in 1952, ending in few if any American gains with the war's termination by Eisenhower in 1953 (Widmaier).

Eisenhower had to campaign in an America that had endured, in the last 20 years, the worst economic crisis to date, had the President who put the country back on track assassinated, withstood the attack on Pearl Harbor, entered World War Two, double nuclear bombed Japan, feared Red China and Russia, and was currently fighting the Korean war. Only 22% of people approved of Truman, and the people were divided against their government in strong opposition of the Korean war. This political discord helped frame the platform on which Eisenhower built his 1952 election on: to regain the trust of the people (Gallup).

### **Campaign goals**

Eisenhower received the Republican nomination in 1952. Right away, he began to promote ideas rather than specific issues. In his acceptance speech, he was "short on specifics, and long on general themes" (Coenen et. al). This paves the way for his prevalent use of political buttons, as only a small blurb of text can fit on the face of the object. of Political buttons have a few advantages over other forms of campaign promotion, among them are the ability to broadcast your allegiance, bluntness, and the joy of having a physical object. How do these characteristics confer an advantage that coincides with Ike's campaign goals? Eisenhower wanted to be portrayed in an Andrew Jackson-esque "president for the people" light. Andrew Jackson spit tobacco on the

White House floor and hosted an inauguration party with an open-invitation guest list (Gordon). Eisenhower made no attempt to impress others with a vast vocabulary, and directly instructed people to call him Ike. His use of a nickname and plain English aided him in his quest to seem relatable (UVA). He encouraged the American people to call him "Ike", both before, during, and after his presidency. Few prominent political figures are widely known by not even their first name, and even fewer by a further shortened version. This campaign persona ties in nicely with the joy of having a physical object that campaign buttons evoke. Although Eisenhower did not personally design, print, or mass produce the "I Like Ike" buttons, they serve as a gift from his campaign team (which represents Ike) to the constituency. It creates a sort of bond that cannot be formed via media programming- that can come off as preaching, whereas by involving buttons into his campaigns, Ike is giving a gift to the public. Additionally, the plain text: "I like Ike", is consistent with his usage of plain words, thus promoting attainability and relatability. Campaign buttons are small, and can only fit a few words. For this reason, they were the perfect canvas for Ike to display his short, straightforward slogan to the American people.

Going along with his campaign strategy of seeming very normal and relatable as the president for the people, Ike also employed glittering generalities. Glittering generalities, often thought to be a form of propaganda, are a commonly used form of campaigning where the candidate appeals to a voters emotions rather than their rational thought, in order to inspire them to vote in said candidate's favor (Cross). These statements are infamous for being influential, yet not backing up the assertions made or providing any context. While vague, glittering generalities do create a sense of community and common goals: to elect Eisenhower. His most famous slogan, "I Like

Ike” is a glittering generality in that it provides no rationale for why said person proclaiming their like holds these feelings, but they do so anyway. This ties in well with the idea of political buttons because of their size and therefore blunt statements. Since Eisenhower was one with his constituency, the bluntness that political buttons offer was an attractive quality of this medium of campaigning. There would be no room on a button to include the text “I Like Ike because he has the superior strategy in handling foreign policy and other affairs, including but not limited to taxes, welfare, and the war on drugs”. For this reason, buttons are the perfect venue to convey Ike’s belief in a concept rather than its breakdown. Ike’s prevalent use of buttons begged the constituency to buy into the abstract concept he had created “Ike”, rather than the issues themselves. He sold his personhood, his relatability, and more than anything, his Americanism, and it bought him eight years in the White House.

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