

ART ACTIVITY

*Political Buttons***Background**

Political buttons in the United States can be traced all the way back to President George Washington's first inauguration in 1789, but the pinback buttons we know today first appeared in 1896. These celluloid buttons, made by sealing a paper disc under a layer of clear plastic onto metal backing, presented mass-produced and colorful ways to make statements. These buttons quickly became both a popular advertising medium and a collectible. Buttons continued to be used for political campaigns, such as Shirley Chisholm's run for the presidency and Bella Abzug's congressional campaigns in the early 1970s. They were also used to show support for causes or social movements, such as those made to advocate for the release of activist and political prisoner Angela Davis. Today, people make and wear pinback buttons for a variety of social and political causes, as well as for personal expression.

Task

Drawing inspiration from pinback buttons of the 1970s, students will create their own set of buttons that express the views of a social movement or political campaign of that time period. Students will consider the design elements that make the messaging of a button effective, and will also discuss pinback buttons as artifacts and material culture.

Materials

- Pencils
- Scrap/sketch paper
- Wooden nickels / Unfinished wood circles for craft projects (2" or 4")

- Markers (Suggested brands: Sharpie or Prismacolor)
- Magazines
- Mod Podge
- Paint brushes (synthetic)
- Small cups for Mod Podge
- Scissors
- Super glue (Suggested Brand: Elmer's ProBond Advanced)
- Pin back clasps

Art Vocabulary

- **collage:** A two-dimensional work of art made by layering and gluing pieces of pictures, paper, and/or found materials.
- **graphic design:** Visual communication using two-dimensional images and text.
- **logo:** A symbol that identifies a business, individual, or group.
- **mixed media:** Artwork created using more than one medium.

Steps

- Invite students to discuss the different ways that people express their political views.
 - How do you share and express things that are important to you?
 - How do you make statements about your beliefs in your everyday life?
 - What are some ways that people can promote their views concisely and persuasively?
- First, have students analyze three buttons from the 1970s: [Free Angela Davis](#), [Shirley Chisholm for President](#), and [Bella! For Congress](#). Lead a discussion using the line of questioning below:

- What do you notice about each of these buttons?
- How are they similar? How are they different?
- What are the main visual elements that make up the design of these buttons?
- How are the image and text both important to the message?
- Who might have made each button and why?
- What can you learn from each one?
- How might buttons be an effective way to gain support and attention?
- Do you wear buttons on your clothing, backpack, or other personal items? What kinds of buttons do you wear and why?
- Students now have the opportunity to design and create their own set of buttons. They should choose a cause that they have learned about from the 1960s and 1970s as the inspiration for their design. It can be a political campaign, a call to action, or an expression of the values and ideologies of a civil rights or other activist group from this time period.
- Before students begin designing their buttons, discuss the following:
 - Pinback buttons are not often considered to be art objects, but rather pieces of material culture. What elements do pinback buttons share with works of art?
 - Buttons are small objects with limited space. How will you use this space to convey your message?
 - What graphic design elements (balance of color, form, line, shape, size, space, and text) do their creators have to consider?
 - What images, symbols, logos, slogans, or words are associated with the cause you chose? How will you incorporate them into your designs?
- Hand out pencils, scrap paper, and wooden craft circles so students can sketch and plan their designs.
 - They can trace around the wooden craft circles to plan the size of their designs appropriately.

- Sketch to experiment with different graphic design elements.
- Choose their three favorite designs to turn into buttons.
- When students are ready to begin decorating their buttons, hand out the rest of the supplies. Students can choose to draw and add color to their designs with markers, they can use magazine cutouts to collage their buttons, or they can use both methods for a mixed media approach.
 - For students choosing to use markers, they can draw their designs directly onto their wooden craft circles.
 - For students choosing to collage, they can attach each piece using the Mod Podge as glue.
- When students have finished their button designs, they should paint a coat of Mod Podge over the surface of their buttons to seal and create a finish. Then set the buttons aside to dry.
- Once the Mod Podge has dried, give each student a pin back clasp to super glue on to the back of their buttons.
- When students have finished, have them reflect on the following questions:
 - What cause did you choose as the inspiration for your buttons and why?
 - What did you choose to include on your buttons?
 - How did you convey a larger message with a limited amount of space? Which of your three designs do you think is the most effective in conveying your message?
 - How does your button compare to the buttons made during the 1960s and 1970s? How does your button compare to pinback buttons we see today?
 - What can we learn from pinback buttons as a piece material culture? What do they tell us about the people that made them and wore them?

Button Decorating Tips:

Not all materials hold up well with Mod Podge. For example, ink from Crayola markers will smear when coats of Mod Podge are applied on top of them. If you want to experiment with other materials to decorate buttons, test how they react with the Mod Podge first.

Mod Podge is a multi-purpose material and can be used as a sealer, glue and finish.