With the country blaming the current economic depression on Democratic president Martin Van Buren, the Whigs spied their chance to snatch the White House for the first time. They staged extravagant events and parades with Whig trumpets blaring and Whig confetti flying, while doling out all sorts of souvenirs such as decorated hairbrushes and tobacco tins, all to promote their candidate, William Henry Harrison. Their strategy made the 1840 election, according to most historians, the first modern presidential campaign.

W.H.H.'s candidacy gained momentum when a Democratic newspaper called him a bumpkin who wanted little more than a barrel of hard (alcoholic) cider and a log cabin in which to drink it. The Whigs cleverly turned the jab into the focus of their campaign, portraying Harrison as a Jacksonian man of the people, erecting log cabins for campaign headquarters and serving hard cider in cabin-shaped mugs. They also spread rumors that Van Buren was a spoiled dandy who ate with a gold spoon and bathed in a tub of cologne. No one had to know that Harrison actually lived in a twenty-two-room mansion.

The campaign injected such excitement into the race that an astounding 80 percent of eligible voters cast ballots. Van Buren kept the popular vote respectably close, but he lost the electoral vote by a wide margin, including his home state of New York.

In December 1839, a Van Buren–supporting newspaper, the Baltimore Republican, joked that a barrel of hard cider and a modest pension might induce the elderly William Henry Harrison to “sit out the remainder of his days in his log cabin by the side of a fire, and study moral philosophy.” Harrison was an old man at sixty-eight, more prepared for false teeth than the campaign trail, but thanks to Whig marketing, he achieved a mythical status among frontier drunkards, with Americans clanging cider mugs together in his name at rallies, singalongs, and cabin raisings. Andrew Jackson aptly described the nonsense as “log cabin hard cider and coon humbuggery.” Jackson’s banners, floats, and badges featured “Old Hickory.” Sadly, the Democrats failed to jump on the brassy political trinket bandwagon, producing no items in support of Van Buren.
Henry Clay cotton flag banners. The “Same Old Coon” slogan references the Whigs’ mascot, the raccoon.

One of the only cloth flags produced for Harrison.

A variety of Harrison log cabin-themed brooches and watch fobs. The gilt-glass one was imported from France.
John Brown's October 1859 raid on Harpers Ferry skyrocketed tensions between the North and the South, and the election of 1860 held the fate of the still-fledgling nation in the balance, the outcome determining war or reconciliation. The parties disagreed so vehemently that they released four candidates into the fray, each of whom carried at least one state in the election.

Let's meet the contestants. The Constitutional Union Party, yet another national conservative splinter group of the defunct Whigs, mobilized specifically for this election, nominating John Bell of Tennessee. Slavery position: Whatever the Constitution says, goes. Don't change a thing.

Meeting in Charleston, South Carolina, the governing Democratic Party split when front-runner Stephen Douglas refused to include a proslavery plank in the party platform. Two months later, the southern wing of the Democratic Party held its own convention, nominating current vice president John C. Breckinridge. Slavery position: vehemently proslavery, pushing congressional slave code for the territories. The northern Democrats stuck by Douglas. Slavery position: pro-Popular Sovereignty (states individually determine their slave or free status).

The Republicans surprised everyone by selecting Abraham Lincoln of Illinois as their nominee. Lincoln had been out of public office for more than a decade, but all factions of the party liked him and he hailed from a critical state, Illinois. Slavery position: objected to expansion, but willing to tolerate slavery where it already existed.

Even so, the prospect of a Republican president so angered southerners that they threatened to leave the Union if Lincoln won. Lincoln and Douglas duked it out north, while Breckinridge tried to break Bell down south. When the votes were finally counted, Lincoln won the presidency with nearly two thirds of the electoral vote but only 40 percent of the popular vote and not a single vote from the nine southern states.

With four candidates and the highest stakes in American history, everyone wanted to be involved. Each candidate organized a grassroots campaign, an army of volunteers with peculiar names such as Lincoln's Wide-Awakes and Rail Splitters, Douglas's Little Giants, Little Dous, and Chloroformers (cleverly dubbed for its boast to "put the Wide-Awakes to sleep"), Breckinridge's National Democratic Volunteers, and Bell's Union Sentinels and Bell Ringers. Altogether their ranks numbered nearly a million, more than one for every five votes cast. These corps staged an exorbitant number of public events, most notably spectacular torchlight parades, which were witnessed by millions.

The Republicans brought out their A-game in 1860. No longer were they the
split rail, which remarkably summed up the epic notions of Lincoln's heroic rise from humble origins, the mystique of the frontier, and the dignity of free labor into an easily marketable package. Lincoln's Wide-Awakes tooted real rails in their parades, as well as wooden axes engraved with the legends ‘Old Abe’ and ‘Prince of Rails.’ The final element in Abe’s image was his western background, critical not only to court his region, but to play on easterners’ enduring

FOR PRESIDENT,

ABRAM LINCOLN.

FOR VICE PRESIDENT,

HANNIBAL HAMLIN.

When Lincoln was nominated, many Easterners did not know how to spell his first name, as demonstrated on this cloth flag.
fascination with the Wild West. “Honest Abe of the West” was a popular tune of the time, and tokens bore the matter-of-fact plea “The Great Rail Splitter of the West Must and Shall Be Our Next President.”

The three opposing candidate camps claimed that the Republicans’ steadfast stances on slavery and other issues made them a disruptive force threatening the Union. The Lincoln camp combated the accusations with tokens, banners, and ferrotype proclaiming “The Union Must and Shall Be Preserved,” igniting an “I love the Union more,” “No, I love the Union more” battle among all four candidates.

John Bell didn’t belong to the Constitutional Union Party for nothing. Aside from a few clever campaign objects picturing a bell, all his items centered on one word looped endlessly... Union... Union... Union. Tokens urged “The Constitution and the Union/Now and Forever,” “Union Forever/Freedom to All,” and “Constitution and Union.”

Stephen Douglas was a devout Unionist as well, but he approached the theme through his theory of popular sovereignty, with tokens warning “Intervention Is Disunion 1860/M.Y.O.B.” (standing for “Mind Your Own Business”) and crowning Douglas “The Champion of Popular Sovereignty.”

The southern Democrat John C. Breckinridge put forth the least effort in the “I love the Union” fest, opting mostly to campaign for southern rights, with tokens reading “Our Country and Our Rights.” The southern Democratic campaign’s defiant unwillingness to compromise led to a token urging “No Submission to the North,” which the party later paired with a reverse of another Breckinridge token celebrating “The Wealth of the South/Rice Tobacco Sugar Cotton” to make a very popular memento for Confederate enthusiasts.
1912: My Hat Is Still in the Ring

If you want a country run right, you should just run it yourself. Theodore Roosevelt's opinion of President William Howard Taft had deteriorated exponentially by 1912 and he saw no logical choice but to dethrone his protégé. Roosevelt and Taft engaged in a vicious struggle for the top spot at the Republican convention, and although Roosevelt was a darling among voters, Taft wielded more influence with the party leaders, giving him the Republican nod.

Roosevelt didn't know how to do anything quietly, let alone lose graciously. If the Republicans wouldn't endorse him, he would just have to endorse himself. Perpetually looking through "Roose"-tinted glasses, Teddy formed his own political party, the Progressives, specifically to nominate himself for the presidency. Roosevelt's claim that he was as "strong as a bull moose," led many to refer to Teddy's new baby as the Bull Moose Party.

The third candidate, somewhat lost in the Republican catfight, was Democratic nominee Woodrow Wilson, who was not an imposing figure or exciting personality, but stood to gain exponentially from the chaos in the Republican camp. In a race as tight as a 30-inch waist on Taft, Wilson triumphed thanks to his portly challenger,

Wilson was the first president to hold a press conference.

Above: A metal pin from the Bull Moose Progressive ticket of Roosevelt and Johnson.

Right: This metal mechanical bank references Roosevelt's hunting trip to Africa when he killed over 1,200 animals, most of which are now in taxidermy form at the the Museum of Natural History in New York. When Roosevelt shoots a coin into the tree, a bear pops out. Oddly, there are no bears in Africa.
When you blew into this metal whistle, it looked as if you were sporting Roosevelt's teeth.
Roosevelt owed the strongest third-party campaign in history to his marketable celebrity persona, echoed in teddy bears eerily decked in his famous teeth and glasses (a scary sight, indeed) and items adorned with his “Bull Moose” and “Dee-lighted” catchphrases. Some inscriptions reminded voters of his return, such as “My Hat is in the Ring” (during the primaries and Republican convention) or “My Hat Is STILL in the Ring” (during the general election), but ended up reading as painful reminders that Roosevelt had overstayd his welcome.

The Prohibition candidates for president and vice president in 1912. Their platform precluded drinking, dancing, and men and women living together except to procreate—even when married.
The new decade ushered in progressive alterations to the electoral process. First, party conventions opened their gates to an influx of women and minority delegates, and in 1971, the Twenty-sixth Amendment dropped the voting age to eighteen.

In the Democratic camp, southern states’ rights champion George Wallace fought George McGovern of South Dakota during the primaries, with Wallace taking home surprising wins in Maryland and Michigan where blue-collar workers felt that the Democrats had conceded too much power to minorities. However, a gunman cut Wallace’s campaign short at a Maryland rally with five swift bullets, including one in his spinal column, paralyzing the segregationist from the waist down, and handing the nomination to McGovern.

Although the Watergate burglary had already taken place, the secret was still concealed, allowing Richard Nixon and
Above, left: This poster was made exclusively for Halloween.

Above: Nixon cigarettes with one of his most famous expressions on the box.

Left: A Nixon poster including all his greatest moments.
This pro-Nixon multicolor feathered headdress was perhaps the only campaign item ever to appeal exclusively to Native Americans, albeit offensively. What member of the Sioux community would actually wear this rude cowboys-and-Indians paper crown?

Spiro Agnew to win easy renomination at the Republican convention. What irked voters more was the news that McGovern’s running mate, Senator Thomas Eagleton of Missouri, had once undergone electric shock therapy for depression. McGovern stood by Eagleton for a while, but eventually replaced him with former Peace Corps director Sargent Shriver.

McGovern accused Nixon of being the most corrupt president in U.S. history, but Nixon still trounced him by nearly twenty million votes.

The Vietnam War and the turbulent ’60s had spawned an army of reform-minded activists, leading to hordes of rambunctious zealots vying for president in the Democratic Party or on their own. However, none of these eccentric candidates made a dent in November.

The Nixon campaign produced such odd clothing pieces as scarves and suspenders along with reelection buttons like “Four More Years” and “Nixon Now More Than Ever” in gigantic quantities due to the unprecedented amount of cash accumulated through fundraisers. Nixon’s incumbency (along with his zest for being in charge) led to bumper stickers and buttons labeled simply “The President,” or that exclaimed, “Right On, Mr. President” and “Young Voters for the President.” Nixon used his withdrawal of most troops from Vietnam in November 1972 as passage onto the peace train. One button featured a soaring dove trumpeting, “Peace/Strength/Stability,” while another read “America Anew in ’72/ Nixon-Agnew for the Red, White and Blue.”
While Nixon’s well-oiled fundraising machine pumped in the cash from special interest groups, the McGovern campaign’s shortage on funds led to one of the most creative sets of items in years. Rising costs forced Democratic higher-ups to hand over a majority of its campaign to local fundraising efforts. Prizes to donors were reminiscent of a PBS pledge drive. Twenty-five dollar donors were awarded “McGovern Million Member Club” buttons and membership cards, while contributions of a dollar bought “Buck Nixon/I Did” buttons.

Once the donations rolled in, production began. Smiley faces and “Robin McGovern” caricatures playfully promoted their candidate. A “Gay Citizens for McGovern” button was the first of its kind in national presidential politics, and feminist group buttons replaced the o in McGovern with the ancient sign of the female. The “I Love McGov” campaign lunged at Nixon as well, with buttons reading “The Committee to Reject the President,” “Nixon’s Through in ’72” and

“I put the buildings up, but I can’t keep up with the cost of living.”

“I’m voting for McGovern.”