Thank you for participating in today’s webinar on caring for political memorabilia.

I’m Whitney Baker, Head of Conservation Services at the University of Kansas (KU) Libraries in Lawrence, Kansas. I believe that I was invited to speak on this topic for two reasons: 1) I participated in a panel at the 2018 American Institute for Conservation meeting on preserving social protest archives, and 2) I have researched bumper stickers and decals, common types of political memorabilia. I am trained as a library and archives conservator. I also teach a collections care class for the KU Museum Studies program.

POLL 1: Make-up of listening audience
“Political memorabilia” is a rather arbitrary term, as many objects could become political with the addition of a slogan or image. For the purposes of this presentation, I decided to include not just materials that are part of political campaigns, but also collections of political interest groups and materials from a particular political figures. All of these materials may be found in cultural heritage repositories.

When I was preparing this talk, I asked lots of colleagues, “when I say ‘political memorabilia,’ what do you think of?” Buttons came up the most frequently, followed by paper items like posters and banners, as well as bumper stickers. I will cover those types of materials today. If I haven’t addressed a type of object you’re interested in, please bring it up during the discussion time.

POLL 2: What types of political memorabilia do you have in your collection?
The University of Kansas has a large political collection, the Wilcox Collection of Contemporary Political Movements. It’s fairly unique in that it includes both left- and right-wing political groups from the 1960s to the present. We continue to add to the collection and it is heavily used by researchers.

We also have many political items in our University Archives and the Kansas Collection. The images you’ll see today are from these three collections at the University of Kansas.

Disclaimer: There are paraphernalia representing many different political viewpoints and causes in this slide show, but I am not endorsing any particular one. They are here as examples of types of materials you might find in your collections.
Most of the work we receive in the conservation lab is paper-based, but it’s not uncommon for us to be asked to care for three-dimensional artifacts from our archival collections. Because we are not trained object conservators, we don’t treat those items, but we do our best to provide proper housing for them.

The parameters we’ve developed are on the screen. We don’t have a particular budget for dealing with artifacts so we can’t usually purchase special supplies. Also, when we use materials that we have on-hand, they’re familiar to everyone in our workplace so our colleagues will understand how to use them. For example, we try to use standard-size archival boxes that we routinely use for paper-based collections. They fit on our shelves well and make sense to everyone.

Many of our political collections are heavily used, so we try to devise simple housing solutions that will be easy for someone to undo and repackage after an item is used.

I often employ museum studies students to help with these projects, and I almost always ask them to complete an inventory when they are housing a large collection of similar items, since they’re handling everything anyway. It’s unlikely permanent staff will ever find time to inventory some of these collections.
In addition, I like to think about how items such as political materials will be used. Will they be frequently exhibited, either in cases or in a class display? For class use, an item might be displayed in an open box if the housing is designed for that purpose.

Will individuals be allowed to handle the item? If so, it should be clearly stated when gloves are required, and it should be clear how to remove an item from its housing.

Are materials primarily for research purposes? Will they ever be loaned to another institution?
No collection care webinar would be complete without a nod to the Agents of Deterioration. While we’re speaking today about housings, of course we need to also be aware of these issues, as they can negatively or positively affect entire collections.
Just a short discussion of some storage terminology before we begin. These terms are often used rather freely and it’s important to know that there aren’t a lot of scientific standards attached to most of them.

pH technically refers to the acidity of a solution, but in our context it is used to refer to the acidity of paper or board that is used in enclosure construction.

Some papers and boards are pH neutral (7 on the pH scale), or what is sometimes called “acid free.” Some of our collections are best stored in a pH neutral environment. Others are best stored in a box, folder, or envelope that has calcium carbonate added to the paper pulp as an “alkaline reserve,” making the paper alkaline, or with a pH higher than 7.

Another word that is used a lot is “archival,” which technically refers to archives, but is used to denote storage materials that are appropriate for long-term preservation. Please note that this term may be used rather loosely. When in doubt, contact a supplier and ask for more information.
I’ll talk about various categories of objects. First I’ll start with what’s probably the simplest: ephemeral paper items that are fairly small in size. These may include pamphlets, leaflets, broadsides, small posters, and the like.

On each of these introduction slides I’ll include some typical storage materials used to house the class of items. These are just suggestions, but they will reflect the most common materials used.

Depending upon the stability of a paper item, it might be fine standing upright in a pamphlet box, on its side in an archival folder and box, or it might need to be stored flat.
The simplest methods to store small paper items is in an envelope or archival folder. In archives, it’s typical for many items to be placed in one folder. Sometimes I’ll place a very small item in an envelope or inside a folded piece of paper to make it a little larger in the folder so it doesn’t get lost.
Many pamphlets are pretty strong and can be stood on end without issue. In our library we store items by size, so we are assured of having all pamphlets in a box be about the same size. This system doesn’t work as well when you have very large items next to smaller ones. The larger items are often unsupported and will start to sag.

For items that will be stored in pamphlet boxes but aren’t quite as sturdy, alkaline paper envelopes are a great solution. They are pretty inexpensive per item and provide good structural support.
Larger items (medium-sized) are typically stored in folders and placed within a box that has one side that drops open to allow your hands to firmly grasp the items inside.

If the item is too large for a box or those are unavailable, medium-sized folders can be placed on oversize flat shelves or a map case. It’s possible to add bumpers in a map case to section it so that similarly sized folders may be stored together. This process allows more items to fit in a map case and prohibits the shifting that can happen when the drawer is opened or closed.

The item on the left was created with magic marker, which is often unstable. Consider keeping items like this in their own folders.
Here’s an example of a political newspaper collection that is stored in a drop-front box. For this project we purchased folded pieces of paper from a bookbinding supply company—they are designed as endsheet paper for new bookbindings.

The endsheet paper is not as strong as normal folders, but is much less expensive and is still alkaline-buffered so it provides good chemical protection. We decided to use the endsheet paper folders for this project because we retrieve (page) entire boxes for patrons to use in our reading room, as they often need many issues at once for their research. As such, we never page just one folder from this box at a time; the paper folders are not strong enough to be carried far without support.
Banners, Flags, and Oversize Posters

Materials:
- Tubes (preferably acid-free)
- Archival paper, usually pH neutral (acid-free)
- Unbleached muslin
- Cotton ties
- Polyester (Mylar)

A second class of objects is defined by size: oversize posters, banners, and flags that create storage challenges.

There are two main ways to store such items: padded and boxed or rolled. I will also show a hybrid approach: rolled in a box.

Here you’ll see some common types of materials used in housing such materials. Please refer to the handout for more resources on storing oversize materials.
Here we see a large political banner. It’s really a mixed media object: a painted bedsheets with magazine pages, photographs, and textile pieces attached. It’s a challenge no matter how you look at it.

I found this item in our stacks folded in a box, so I’ll show you pictures of how it looked. We’ve since decided to loosely roll this item because of the items attached to it and the challenge of folding in such a way as to avoid creasing those items.
When you have to fold an oversize item, use “snakes” or rolls of tissue paper to pad the folds. This makes them gradual and avoid sharp creases. You might also add a layer of tissue paper to the bottom of the box, insert the item, and fold the paper around the item.

You can buy both unbuffered (pH neutral) or buffered (alkaline pH) tissue paper. Although many collection items benefit from being in contact with buffered paper, if you’re not sure of all the components of the item in question, it’s generally better to choose unbuffered.
We always photograph objects before we house them, then add a color photo to the outside of the box. We hope this cuts down on object removal just to see what’s inside.
Here’s an example of a banner that was very long but not particularly tall. In this case, the item was rolled and inserted in a box. This takes a bit more hand skills but it might be a good solution if you don’t have a rolled storage area but do have room for storing boxes.
We used a saw to cut down an archival quality storage tube to slightly taller than the item.

The tube was covered with “acid-free” tissue, then the item was rolled image-size-in onto the tube. It was covered with a layer of polyester (plastic) and tied with cotton tape. Paper or muslin could also be used as the outer layer.

A rounded shape was cut out of corrugated board and inserted inside at the ends of the box to make a sling of sorts for the item to sit on.

See Angela Andres’s blog post for Spencer Research Library in the handouts for more information on this type of housing.
Another solution is hanging storage. We used a Conserve-o-Gram from the National Park Service to construct this set-up using playground chain, metal S-hooks, and electrical conduit. We removed the shelves from adjacent ranges and attached the playground chain to the shelving braces.

A link to the Conserve-o-Gram is included in the handout.
As discussed previously, it’s a great idea to add pictures to the items themselves to prevent unnecessary unrolling. We also create a picture map to highlight what things are stored in a section. This makes it faster to find what you’re looking for.
Here’s another option for rolled storage—while it’s preferable to have a support bar running through the tubes so as not to place stress on the item itself, you could convert brackets into storage devices with the addition of Ethafoam or other soft padding. By this method you can store a large collection in a relatively small space.
I have completed two large research projects on bumper stickers and decals. It was a joy to examine thousands of these items to determine how they’re made and how they age. I also researched their histories. I hoped to devise simple, accessible preservation recommendations for museums and archives. In addition, by studying how bumper stickers had changed materially, I could provide data to aid in dating and characterizing stickers—useful info for collection managers and archivists.

Of course the main concern for collection managers is that these materials stick to themselves or other things.

I’ve included links to my articles on bumper stickers and decals in the handout.
Bumper stickers are usually printed on paper or vinyl, with an adhesive layer on the back side (verso). There’s also a paper removable liner that’s impregnated with silicone. It sticks to the adhesive when needed but also be removable when necessary. Despite being made to last just a few weeks or months, bumper stickers are rather complex in their composition.

Bumper stickers often emit gases as they age—called “offgassing.” This is usually a result of the vinyl, when present, or various adhesives used at different points in time. These gaseous chemicals can react with other materials stored nearby, so it’s best to store bumper stickers separately from paper or photographic material whenever possible.
Decals are constructed from paper with a layer or layers of water-activated adhesive on their surface or surfaces. As such, they are very sensitive to moisture, as well as changes in relative humidity. They should be stored in a cool, dry place. They are generally quite stable if the atmospheric conditions are correct.

They generally don’t offgas because their materials are more stable, but they were often constructed from rather poor quality paper that may yellow or become acidic as they age.
Bumper stickers and decals are generally fine stored vertically in standard alkaline folders and document boxes, as with other archival materials. It’s best to store them in individual folders. Storing vertically minimizes the pressure that might result from a stack of items on top of one another.

I have found that the best manner of containing a particularly sticky sticker or decal is to fold a piece of silicone release paper, cut to just slightly smaller than the size of the folder, and place the sticker within it. Although it’s tempting, avoid using polyester or another plastic, as that material can sometimes stick to the inks on some types of stickers.
Campaign and other political buttons are wonderful exhibit and teaching tools.

In general, it’s best to avoid using the pinbacks—the metal mechanism for pinning the button to a surface—as part of the storage solution. The metal can be fragile or rusty, and you don’t want to cause damage to an item you’re hoping to preserve.

I’ll discuss my favorite method for preserving buttons.
When you get a group of buttons they can weigh more than you might expect. We’ve had to process some very large collections of buttons. Our challenge was to make them individually accessible and retrievable while keeping their storage blueprint small.

This record storage box was filled with over 900 buttons—the box took two people to lift!
For this project the archivist wanted individual access to the materials, meaning that every item would have its own cataloging record and barcode. While that’s rare for us, this system allowed us to include the barcode in individual packaging.

We like to use archival specimen bags to house individual buttons. In our conservation lab we always have lots of bits of paper and cardstock, so we cut them to fit the bag sizes. We often use stamps for large archival collections, and have used them here to only have to write a little bit of each call number. The buttons are slid into the bags and are not pinned to the cardstock or paper insert.
I like to use archival slide boxes that come six to a larger size archival box. Many of the archival supply companies sell this slide box system. We use both the bottoms and lids of the slide boxes for this purpose, as you can see in the slide on the right. (The lids are slightly taller than the bottoms, but both work fine for this purpose.) As needed, we add dividers when items are arranged by subject.
For oversize buttons, we’ve had great success using an archival “shoebox” and adding 20-point cardstock to make internal dividers to stand the buttons vertically.
Political ribbons were popular at certain times in our history, and sometimes are combined with pinback buttons. Such items are best stored flat to avoid further creasing and crumpling.
As we do not have a textile conservator on staff to help relax creases or repair tears, all we should do is properly house these items, which are often quite fragile.

In this series of images you’ll see a technique we used to safely attach ribbons to a piece of matboard. Slits were cut near top and bottom of the ribbon heights, slightly wider than the ribbons, and a piece of soft polyethylene strapping was threaded through the slits and secured on the back of the mat with double-sided tape. In this manner, the ribbons are secured but not obscured.
We cut a window mat to serve as a spacer between the backing board and another top board that was hinged to the final window mat. For more information on matting, please see the webinar handout.

If you had a button attached to a ribbon you would secure the button too, with a strap across the largest diameter point, or add a bumper around the button with attached bits of foam or corrugated board.
T-shirts

Materials:
• Standard archival boxes
• Tissue or batting
• Rolled to save space

Many political events and protests would not be complete without a commemorative T-shirt. We have hundreds in our collection and have devised a pretty simple way to effectively store many in a small space. This method also allows them to be easily viewed and accessed without having to rifle through a big box.
The system we use is to roll a them on a tissue paper core, with the sleeves folded in. A piece of tissue paper is gently placed on top of the rolls. We roll the T-shirts in such a way that the design is visible when the box is opened.

We also include an image of the contents of the box, as well as individual pictures of the shirts taken before rolling. These pictures are inserted in a sleeve in the lid of the box.
Since we have time, I wanted to include a little bit about plaques and statues. We have many large political collections that have included many, many plaques. They are sometimes challenging and also often lower priority than other items in our collections, so what are some simple solutions for housing these items?

In the picture you’ll see a bust that is located in our stacks, of a former governor of our state. It is a low-use item and probably fine where it is but it could use some protection. (And if you’re in an earthquake zone, storing a heavy item on a top shelf isn’t such a great approach.)
Here we see a three-dimensional plaque given to a former governor of Kansas. This item is a little unwieldy. It could be placed in a box, but it’s probably also just fine stored on a shelf with some dust protection.

A soft piece of Tyvek, thick tissue paper, or unbleached muslin could all be used as a dustcover. The item in this image was loosely tied in a secure area of the item with cotton twill tape. It’s often a good idea to place items like this on a tray to aid in sliding off a shelf—this item doesn’t have very good hand holds.

It would also be a good idea to add a picture label to cut down on curious unwrappers.
For items that should be stored flat, you might consider a foam or tissue paper bumper inside a standard-size archival box. Here are two examples of plaques that were outfitted with foam bumpers, leaving finger holds to safely remove the item from the box.

What I like about these housings is how the box could also be used as a display device without having to remove the item in question.

People often ask me about hot glue—there are various types and some are more archivally sound than others. We purchase ours from an archival supplier.
Thanks for listening to today’s presentation on caring for some types of political memorabilia. I hope you’ve come up with some new tips or ideas. We’ll open the webinar to questions at this point.
Please contact me with questions.

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