From a perspective nearly 70 years later, it seems as if there could have been only one choice. Hoover, the scapegoat for the Great Depression, who will forever be saddled with a radio announcer’s “Hoobert Heever” malapropism? Or FDR, the man who led America to victory in World War II, won a never-to-be-repeated four consecutive terms, and stared down hard times with the timeless “We have nothing to fear but fear itself”?

But for illustrator Leslie Thrasher’s young woman on the cover of the Nov. 12, 1932, issue of Liberty magazine, who greets visitors to “The Will of the People? Presidential Campaigns That Made the Nation” at the University of Hartford’s Museum of American Political Life, the answer would turn on which campaign had done a better job selling its candidate—just as it has every four years since George Washington tossed his tricornered hat into the ring.

The tactics that campaigns have employed in this uniquely American way of choosing a leader are laid bare in “The Will of the People?” a free-wheeling exhibit that will be open throughout the fall semester. Materials draw on the museum’s trove of 45,000 campaign items, the second largest collection of its kind in the world. The exhibit explores two centuries of influencing the vote, drawing a line that leads from the maneuverings that helped land Thomas Jefferson in the White House in 1800, through Ronald Reagan’s painstakingly choreographed 1980 run, to the current season of sound bites, soft money, and irrelevant conventions.

Organizers of “The Will of the People? Presidential Campaigns That Made America” are Zina Davis (left), director of the Museum of American Political Life, and co-curators Warren Goldstein (center), chair of the history department, and Edmund Sullivan, professor emeritus.
Herbert Hoover), and 1980 (Ronald Reagan vs. Jimmy Carter and John Anderson), the exhibit shows why each of these campaigns changed American politics, rearranged American political parties, and pioneered new kinds of electioneering, campaign finance, or use of the media. Guided by the narratives of curators Warren Goldstein and Edmund Sullivan, visitors to the exhibit will be able to explore for themselves that nagging election-year question: How did things ever get this way?

Those expecting images of thoughtful voters casting ballots after a full airing of the issues of the day may be surprised by the evidence gathered by Sullivan and Goldstein, noted scholars of American political and cultural history. It’s impossible not to be swept up in the clashes of egos and ideals on display. “Political parties organize Americans’ political ideas and feelings in order to elect candidates,” says Goldstein, chairman of the University’s history department. Agrees Sullivan, a retired professor who writes and lectures widely on campaign history, “It’s crass advertising at one point and subtle manipulation at another.”

Consider one of the items in the exhibit, a mock 50-cent piece from the 1896 clash between William McKinley and William Jennings Bryan. Over a caricature of Bryan, the coin declares, “In God We Trust.” Underneath is the punch line: “For the Other 47 Cents.” This was one of the many ways that the McKinley campaign hammered home the idea that Bryan’s plan for the free coinage of silver would lead to worthless money. For those who didn’t get the point, yet another bogus coin spelled out the evils America could expect from Bryan’s plan: “socialism,” “anarchy,” “lunacy,” “idleness,” and “starvation.”

Not good. If the “bimetallism” debate seems distant now, substitute campaign finance reform, or even abortion, as the subject. Goldstein says, “Working people understood it in a way that college professors don’t now,” and displayed their feelings with the ornamental “gold bugs” in the collection.

**A New Brand of Politics**

Marcus Alonzo Hanna, a successful Ohio businessman, helped the nominee raise an unheard-of $3.5 million for his campaign, turning the cash into a landslide of pamphlets, buttons, pins, and posters. Forget White House coffees and visits to Buddhist temples. Hanna would return with moneybags—real, bulging moneybags—from meetings with Wall Street backers. “He raised soft money, hard money, every kind of money,” Goldstein says. Without setting foot on the campaign trail, McKinley won, while outspending his Democratic opponent 20 to 1—and a new brand of politics was born.

Perhaps Hanna’s tactics will sound familiar: Raise as much money as possible, particularly from large businesses. Use that money to discredit the opponent. Centralize the campaign. Make the candidate, and not the issues, the theme.

“He’s the guru,” Sullivan says of Hanna. “It’s the first time money becomes a deliberate object of campaigns, the raising of money. Not that it didn’t happen before; it did. But now it’s a planned procedure. Hanna was so significant that to this day, he’s considered probably the finest political strategist this country has ever seen. All his progeny today, they’re there because of Mark Hanna. The (James) Carvilles and the telemarketers, the direct mailings and the indirect, and the demographers, the whole gang of ’em. He’s the first one to be able to demonstrate that you take money, media, and strategists, and in a sense, each feeds off the other.”

Cuthroat attacks are nothing new. A 1793 drawing, “A Peep Into the Anti-Federal Club,” skewers Jefferson as a man who lusts only for power, while the devil himself looks on, musing, “What a pleasure it is to see one’s work thrive so well.” It’s a reminder of a time when it was something of an epithet to call anyone a small-d democrat.

The framers founded not a democracy, Goldstein points out, but a republic, with the federal government, in fact, well insulated from the will of the people. Consider its composition: a federal judiciary whose members serve for life, a president chosen by an Electoral College, and a Senate chosen by state legislatures (senators were not elected directly until 1913). The only branch chosen by the people, the House of Representatives, had the shortest term and the least amount of power. (All states effectively limited the franchise to white men. Most had property qualifications for voting.) No wonder a broadside of 1816 cries, “Federalists Attend! Beware the Arts of Democracy!”

Jefferson was vilified as an atheist, pagan, and traitor in a truly brutal campaign. “It was a level of political invective that makes our current politicians look mealymouthed, like milquetoasts. Unbelievable,” Goldstein marvels. It was during that campaign that Jefferson, while considering a calculated public appearance, noted that “sometimes it is useful to furnish occasions for the flame of public opinion to break out.” Actively campaigning for the presidency was just not done at the time. The election itself was a mess, a tie between Jefferson and his own running mate, Aaron Burr, that was subsequently broken by the House of Representatives on 36 ballots—after much backroom wheeling and dealing. Still, Sullivan points out, it was the first time in Western history that power had passed peacefully from one political party, the Federalists, to another, Jefferson’s Democrat-Republicans.
An Appeal to the Masses

By the time Andrew Jackson made his second run for the White House in 1828, Federalism was dead. With western expansion shifting the balance of political power, and most states dropping property requirements for voting, the time was right for an appeal to the masses. Handbills urged supporters to turn out, date in arm and cash in hand, for balls to support Jackson, while books and papers recounted Old Hickory’s defeat of the British at the Battle of New Orleans.

It heralded “the so-called rise of the common man,” Sullivan says. “There’s a whole new ball game. Cities are growing; we’re beginning to see a middle class, a working class, a blue-collar voter.” A drawing of Jackson as a frontiersman outside a log cabin doesn’t stretch the truth as much as you might think; Jackson was, in fact, one of only two presidents born in a log cabin (the other was Andrew Johnson). He was also the first president who was not one of the founders, a child of frontier poverty who crashed that elite party.

A print of a stern Jackson, with a frame adorned with actual hickory nuts, is a sample of the images his supporters flooded upon the landscape. While Jackson obeyed custom and stayed home during the campaign, his Democratic Party, largely created by “The Little Magician,” Martin Van Buren, whipped up the electorate in support, holding rallies, bonfires, and parades. When the ballots were counted, John Quincy Adams, Jackson’s National Republican opponent, never knew what hit him.

Today, politics tends to be a private affair, and many would consider a question about their views of the candidates an intrusion. Consider, then, that when Lincoln ran against Douglas in 1860, the
appetite for politics was so keen that an industry had grown up to supply all manner of campaign bric-a-brac, for a price. In the museum display are catalogs crammed full of clothing, banners, and buttons, as well as the actual items, such as elaborate kerosene torches for nighttime parades. The centerpiece of the museum, a life-size diorama, re-creates one such rally, a “Wide-Awake Club” held for Lincoln in Hartford. Anyone turned off by the distant, mass-media approach of modern campaigns can be forgiven for longing for the flag-raisings and maypoles and turkey shoots that were part of what Goldstein calls “the boisterous public life of politics.”

The 1860 campaign was dominated by one issue, and the exhibit pays due notice, in ways that are both touching and shocking to modern eyes. “Am I not a man and a brother,” asks a Joshua Wedgwood plate, showing a slave kneeling in chains, while a letter from a slave dealer to his colleagues on the eve of the vote considers the impact on the market and advises a wait-and-see approach. A grotesque cartoon by one of the Great Emancipator’s many foes shows a freakish “Ape” Lincoln trampling civil liberties, uttering, “Necessity, my only law.”

A new medium, radio, had taken hold by the 1932 election, and Herbert Hoover and Franklin D. Roosevelt were ready to take advantage of it. An ad by radio manufacturer Atwater Kent bills the nominating conventions as “Radio’s Greatest Show,” while the candidates themselves, joined by Socialist Norman Thomas, consider the medium’s impact in a Radio News article called “Radio’s Aid to Voters.”

Just as Richard M. Nixon found no friend in television in his 1960 debate with John F. Kennedy, Hoover may have hurt his chances by failing to warm up to the microphone. Roosevelt, who would later become the master of the “fireside chat,” had “a natural flair” for the airwaves, Sullivan says. “On television, he would have been a pro.”

For a Rosetta stone of modern-day political manipulation of the media, look no further than the bulging folder provided by Matthew Lawson, an advance man for Ronald Reagan’s 1980 run against Jimmy Carter. In page after page after page, Lawson advises local organizing groups how to leave absolutely nothing to chance, not even so-called spontaneous events. If you’ve ever seen a clump of cheering, banner-waving supporters keep a television camera trained on them, rather than panning to the vacant places all around them, then you’ve seen Lawson’s work. His lesson A1: “Public perception is political reality.”

To Zina Davis, director of the Museum of American Political Life, the thousands of banners, buttons, broadsides, and other objects that remain from long-ago presidential campaigns are not artifacts but tools to understanding themes that a re relevant to our own day.

“The Will of the People? Presidential Campaigns That Made the Nation,” the exhibition now on display, “demonstrates the rich legacy of visual materials that accompanied campaigns and elections, and that represented a constant desire for the candidate to make some kind of contact with the American people—which still exists today,” Davis said.

Campaign images of William McKinley swathed in American-flag borders, for example, make a not-so-subtle appeal to patriotism, linking the candidate with the nation’s most visible symbol. “We can help make the past come alive, help make us see that we don’t exist as we do today without a strong heritage,” Davis said.

Davis is excited about the ways in which the exhibit will encourage viewers to discuss current-day issues and ideas. Anyone who thinks that Al Gore’s evocation of peace and prosperity is something new, or that free trade is an issue that began in Seattle, will learn otherwise.

“Certainly, presidential politics will be on the minds of most people this time of year, and we hope to enhance that experience by providing a way in which people can look at the campaigns of the past and form their own opinions on issues that still seem salient or crucial in today’s political arena,” she said.

The current blurring of the lines between news and entertainment and the proliferation of electronic media “all go into creating a very rich environment for discussing ideas,” Davis said.
“Here’s Ronald Reagan, whose whole life has been focused on media, projecting an image,” Sullivan says. “For the first time we see a very highly thematic campaign to market that image. It’s happened before—Jack Kennedy, for example—but not to the extent it happens in 1980. And from that point on, we’ve had highly financed, media-driven campaigns in which the image is the reality.” The national party conventions, which had been made moot by the primary system, became nothing more than orchestrated coronations, as network television captured every scripted moment.

Viewing the exhibit will give museum visitors an opportunity to ponder, in what may be the most democratic nation on earth, whether the presidential election that we are approaching this fall and those of the past two centuries, truly reflect the will of the people.

Books by Edmund B. Sullivan
Collecting Political Americana, Christopher Publishing House, 1991
Images of American Radicalism, with Paul Buhle, Christopher Publishing House, 1998
Campaigning with James Michael Curley, with Barry Mushlin and Robert B. Colt, Christopher Publishing, 2000