

POLITICAL

IN CELEBRATION OF THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES MONTH

ECHOES

FROM THE SHELDON MUSEUM ARCHIVES

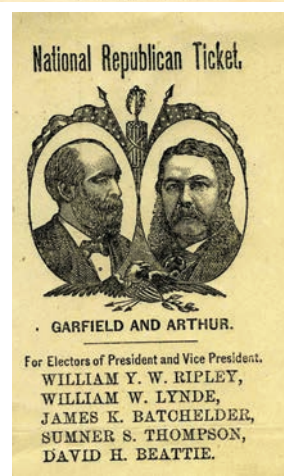
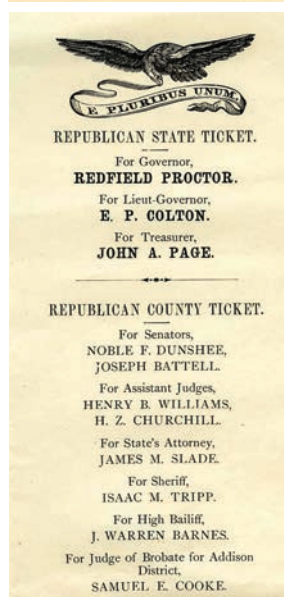
ELECTIONS, THEN AND NOW

News of the upcoming elections has filled our consciousness for months on end. For many, it seems as though politics has never been more heated, with contentious debates, accusations of corruption, and widespread concerns about election infrastructure and voter suppression. Yet this is nothing new. Today's Twitter wars, tense interviews, and leaked videos pale in comparison to the feud between San Francisco politician James B. Casey and newspaper editor James King; angered by the exposure of his corrupt activities, the politician shot the journalist in cold blood on the streets of San Francisco in the summer of 1856.

That same summer, investigators discovered a "stuffer's ballot box," designed to conceal pre-marked ballots to sway an election. Concerned citizens across the country voiced their outrage. New York's State Assembly convened an emergency committee; as they noted, "Underlying as does the ballot the beautiful superstructure of Republican institutions... [we must] guard with especial vigilance its purity. The liberty of the subject, his property and reputation, all depend upon an honest election." In response to this call, New Yorker Samuel Jollie proposed a novel solution: a ballot box made of glass. This invention, he hoped, could restore political transparency, ensure the "purity" of the election, and offer complete security of the voting process.

Jollie's transparent glass globe hovers in an architectural armature of iron columns, proudly exhibiting its gleaming, crystalline interior. At the center of the metal top is a hinged circular lid with locking mechanism. At the very center, like the bullseye of a target, is a circular opening that would admit the ballots.

New York City quickly adopted Jollie's design. And even as we might associate glass with fragility today, its councilmen emphasized its strength: "we believe that the glass cylinder in an iron frame, which would be proof against a



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pistol ball and capable of being secured to the table, would afford every desirable quality of publicity, perfect security, and inviolability to fraud."

The distinctive form of Jollie's box made it a recognizable emblem of these fears and hopes for American democratic society. Beyond their actual use at the polls, the boxes became potent symbols themselves, quickly-recognizable icons of the "ballot box" and the democratic process, and therefore represented in dozens of political cartoons, advertisements, and in allegorical representations of suffrage,

agency and the will of the people.

Amongst the Sheldon Museum Archives' many treasures are rare examples of historical ballots: the slips of paper that citizens would have used to cast their votes and make their voices heard. They appear strikingly different to the "bubble" forms that we use today, which recall standardized tests. Most of the Sheldon ballots are "straight tickets," meaning that voters did not have to circle or indicate their votes. Most strikingly, they are adorned with decorative engravings. On one ballot that includes the familiar names of Redfield Proctor and Joseph Battell, a patriotic eagle soars over the list of candidates, wings spread, unfurling a banner with the motto "E Pluribus Unum." An 1881 "National Republican Ticket" features portraits of presidential candidate James Garfield and running mate Chester Arthur, surrounded by American flags, with an eagle clutching arrows and an olive branch in its claws. These visual cues could remind voters of the solemnity of the occasion and the importance of voting, much as the use of the spherical ballot box.

Although the Jollie box is now devoid of ballots, it remains a potent object in current discussions of political transparency, fairness, and the sanctity of the franchise. Just as the hanging chad, the butterfly ballot, and the Diebold voting machine came to exemplify fears and anxieties about voting, democracy, and representation at the turn of the 21st century, Jollie's box is a compelling embodiment of 19th- and 20th-century election concerns. Amid outcries about the possibilities of election rigging and collusion or the hacking of electronic voting machines, Jollie's transparent ballot box reminds us that the democratic process has always been a contested sphere — and of our obligation to make our voices heard at the polls.

Contributed by Ellery E. Foutch, Sheldon Museum's Research Center Committee member and Assistant Professor in the American Studies Department at Middlebury College, where she teaches courses on the art and material culture of the United States.