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Party Competition on the Internet in Japan

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses how Japanese political parties and candidates have been using the Internet to compete for public support in two national elections held in 2000 and 2001. The major question examined is how far the unique institutional context within Japan of long-standing one-party rule and a controlled media environment has affected the development of Web campaigning by political actors. This question is addressed through analysis of trends over time in party activity online and content analysis of websites. It is concluded that the Internet has had a significant impact on the fortunes of minor parties, opening up cross-party competition and enhancing their calls for legislative reform.

KEY WORDS ▪ Internet ▪ Japan ▪ online campaigning ▪ political parties

Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, research on the political impact and use of the Internet and Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) has grown considerably. While studies have focused on different actors in the political process, they have been united around one fundamental question – will the Internet change politics? Within the field of party politics, this question has focused on two main areas of party activity: first, campaigning and communication style – is the Internet breeding a new form of more direct and interactive communication with voters? And second, how far does the Internet affect party competition? By offering a more decentralized and open space for political communication than the traditional mass media such as television, does the Internet promote voices that were previously consigned to the edges of the political debate or those frozen out? In this article I seek to address these questions in the context of the Japanese political party system, examining the evolution of Web campaigning from the legislative elections of 1995 up to, and focusing specifically on, the more recent elections of 2000 and 2001.

Japan provides a particularly interesting case to examine these debates since, to date, studies of Internet communication by political parties have focused largely on democratic nations with multiparty systems and a relatively non-restrictive media environment – such as Italy, the USA, the Netherlands and the UK.[1] Japan, however, has a long tradition of one-party rule and strict controls on how parties and politicians use the mass media during election campaigns. Such structural arrangements, combined with the tendency toward more candidate-centred forms of politics, arguably provide strong incentives to parties, particularly the smaller parties and independent candidates on the national and local levels, to exploit the new technology.[2]

As we shall see below, such expectations were largely borne out in the initial phase of parties' Internet experimentation. Since 1995, however, the Japanese government, under the auspices of the Public Offices Elections Law (POEL) has sought to apply strict limits to politicians' and parties' use of the Internet. These efforts have effectively prevented political campaigning on the World Wide Web (WWW) in the crucial 7- to 20-day period prior to any election.

In this research report I examine the parties' response to these restrictions and the evolving nature of Internet campaigning since their imposition. How have these controls limited the ability of parties to exploit the Internet as a communication tool? Has concerted opposition to the legislation emerged, and, if so, from whom and to what effect? In answering these questions I first set the scene by providing details about the development of the Japanese party system and about the provisions and rationale behind the POEL. I then discuss early efforts by politicians and parties to launch websites alongside the increasingly restrictive legislative environment. Finally, I analyse the websites produced for the most recent elections of 2000 and 2001 and assess the broader implications of Web campaigning for the party system and government regulation of the media.[3] Overall, I argue that while legislative impediments may have impeded optimal exploitation of Web campaigning in Japan, paradoxically these barriers have also acted as a spur to smaller parties trying to break into the system, and have spurred their calls for revision of existing legislation with momentum. The arrival of the Internet came at a time when the Japanese political system was undergoing a seismic shift in terms of the balance of party power. Thus, while the Internet is not seen as the driving force behind the changes taking place, it has certainly helped to foster and promote existing democratizing trends in the party system.

Party Competition in Post-War Japan

During the post-war period, the Japanese political system witnessed a prolonged period of one-party rule under the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP). The full extent of the LDP's dominance is remarkable in that save for a brief

nine-month hiatus in 1993–4, it has occupied government office since 1955. Key factors contributing to the longevity of the LDP included its ability to draw on core support from both the industrial and agricultural sectors and its ability to reinvent itself by rotating the prime minister's office among the leaders of its five internal factions. Crucially too, it remained vigilant and responsive in terms of policy initiatives to the prevailing political climate and opinions of the electorate (Kohno, 1997; Pempel, 1990; Stockwin, 1987). During the late 1980s and early 1990s, however, the LDP's hegemony was increasingly threatened by a number of political and economic crises. Financial scandals involving LDP politicians erupted which, combined with the government's apparent failure to undertake necessary structural reforms in the Japanese economy, fuelled public frustration. The shock of recession that started in the late 1980s provided a stormy backdrop to these events and fomented increasing levels of dissatisfaction among the electorate with the established parties.

Events came to a head in 1993 when the emboldened opposition parties in the Lower House of Japan's Diet initiated a vote of no confidence in the government. Approval of the motion triggered a general election that saw the LDP replaced by a coalition government composed of eight small parties. Despite enjoying only a brief nine-month tenure in office, the ousting of the LDP marked a watershed in Japanese post-war politics, demonstrating that opposition parties could indeed be genuine contenders for government office. In addition, during that period of non-LDP rule the new Prime Minister Hosokawa Morihito succeeded in pushing through crucial changes in the electoral system, which meant that a more genuinely multiparty system could begin to operate. In place of the existing system, where all 480 seats in Japan's Lower House (House of Representatives) were elected from multi-member constituencies, a new system was installed that combined proportional representation on the block level (180 seats distributed over 11 blocks nationwide) with single-member constituencies (300 seats). Such changes meant that the major parties could no longer dominate elections by flooding constituencies with multiple candidates. These changes also resulted in a strengthened role for national party organizations, since candidates from the same party no longer competed against one another. Such a situation had led to candidates developing their own local support groups (*koenkai*) and running highly personalistic campaigns (Curtis, 1988; Stockwin, 1987).

Although the LDP returned to power and governed throughout the 1990s, it was challenged by a number of other parties. As indicated in Table 1, traditional opposition parties – parties formed prior to 1993, such as the JCP (Japan Communist Party) and the New Komeito Party (formerly the Komeito Party) – have been able to maintain their pre-1993 seat numbers in the Lower House by being mainly successful in the proportional election system.

In addition to these traditional opposition parties, a number of new

Table 1. Lower House election results for select parties since 1983

Party/data	LDP		DPJ[1]		New Komeito		New Liberal Party[2]		JCP		SDP	
Multi-member district system[3]												
1983	258				58				26		112	
1986	306				56				26		85	
1990	275				45				16		136	
1993	223				51				15		70	
Combined Proportional and Single-member district system	Prop	Sing	Prop	Sing	Prop	Sing	Prop	Sing	Prop	Sing	Prop	Sing
October 1996[3]	70	169	35	17					24	2	11	4
Total	239		52						26		15	
June 2000[4]	56	177	47	80	24	7	18	4	20	0	15	4
Total	233		127		31		22		20		19	

[1] The DPJ was formally established in September 1996.

[2] The New Liberal Party (*Jiyuto*) was formally established in 1998.

[3] *Source*: *Seiji handobukku* (Political Handbook), No. 36, 2000. Total seats at this time were 500.

[4] *Source*: *Seiji handobukku* (Political Handbook), No. 37, 2000. Total seats at this time were 480.

Table 2. Upper House election results since 1995 (combined proportional and single-member district system)[1]

Party/data	LDP		DPJ[2]		New Komeito		New Liberal Party[3]		JCP		SDP	
	Prop	Sing	Prop	Sing	Prop	Sing	Prop	Sing	Prop	Sing	Prop	Sing
July 1995[4]	15	31	Not available		2		Not available		5	3	9	7
Total	46		Not available		24		Not available		8		16	
July 1998[4]	14	30	12	15	7	2	5	1	8	7	4	1
Total	44		27		9		6		15		5	
July 2001[5]	45	20	18	8	5	8	2	4	1	4	0	3
Total	65		26		13		6		5		3	

[1] The Upper House has 242 members, half of whom are elected every three years for six-year terms.

[2] The DPJ was formally established in September 1996.

[3] The New Liberal Party (*Jiyuto*) was formally established in 1998.

[4] *Source*: *Seiji handobukku* (Political Handbook), No. 37, 2000.

[5] *Source*: *Chiezo*, 2002.

parties emerged after 1993 led by former LDP politicians who had defected from the party. One of the most successful of these proved to be the Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ), which by 2001 had become the most serious challenger to the LDP. Established in September 1996 by former LDP politicians Hatoyama Yukio and Kan Naoto, the DPJ has steadily increased its number of seats in at least the Lower House of the Diet (see Tables 1 and 2), especially in the single-member district areas formerly dominated by the LDP. Another new party, the Liberal Party of Japan (*Jiyuto*), formed in 1998 and led by former LDP politician Ozawa Ichiro, has also emerged as a significant political force, gaining 22 seats in the 2000 Lower House election.

Despite this evidence of an opening up and overhaul of the party system in Japan, the survey data reveal a growing level of disenchantment with the parties among the electorate. While the LDP was probably worst affected (Kabashima, 1998), overall voter attachment to parties went through a pronounced decline during the 1990s. Prior to 1993 the percentage of non-aligned and floating voters hovered between 25 percent and 35 percent. However, since 1993, the percentage of non-aligned and floating voters has dramatically risen to 50–60 percent of the voting population. Such trends are commensurate with a serious decline in voter turnout (Fukuoka, 2001; Takabatake and Yasuda, 1997).

Political Campaigning and Media Legislation in Japan

It was into this environment of political flux and reform, therefore, that the era of Internet campaigning was born. To interpret the full impact of the Internet's emergence in the midst of these changes, it is necessary also to profile the media environment surrounding party communication in Japan.

Since the 1960s, political advertising in Japan had been very strictly controlled (Akuto, 1996; Curtis, 1988; Pharr, 1996). Provisions introduced in 1964 under the 1950 POEL placed heavy restrictions on the content, amount and means by which candidates and parties could distribute information via the mass media.

Within the POEL, two specific sections have been applied to the use of the Internet during election campaigns. Section 142 of the legislation prohibits candidates from distributing election-related information in the form of text and images that are not in an 'appropriate format' to an unspecified number of people. Section 143 itemizes the appropriate formats and limits for campaign-related information such as posters, signboards, electronic lighting and billboards (Ministry of Home Affairs, Elections Division, 1995). While the legislation might seem heavy-handed, its rationale is democratic in that it is designed to keep election costs low and ensure that all those entering the race will gain a relatively equal amount of public exposure.

Within Section 129 of the POEL a distinction is made between different types of political activities in terms of timing. Political activities (*seiji undo*) are deemed to be undertaken for educational purposes and may be conducted at any time by candidates during and outside the official 7- to 20-day 'campaign activities period' prior to any local, municipal, prefectural or national campaign. However, campaign-specific activities (*senkyo undo*) that are specifically undertaken by candidates to influence the electorate – mainly in the candidates' home constituencies – during the officially sanctioned 'campaign activities period' are not permitted. These restrictions have not been amended despite the new electoral system coming into effect in 1994.

These provisions have, of course, carried a number of important consequences for Japanese parties and their voters. One obvious effect has been that the media, paid and unpaid, are considered to play a reduced role in forming political impressions compared with other countries (Flanagan, 1996). Major news organizations tend to take a highly non-partisan stance during elections by not mentioning politicians or candidates by name (Flanagan, 1996). Relatedly, networking and personal organizations have come to play a more important role for parties and candidates in terms of communicating their message (Akuto, 1996). One further logical consequence of particular relevance for our purposes is that such strict controls create a strong incentive for parties to use newer and more open forms of media such as the Internet.

The Growth of Internet Campaigning

The idea that parties would be keen to exploit the Internet as a new means of communication with the electorate is certainly borne out by the evidence of political activity online. Prior to the July 1995 Upper House election, approximately 40 Japanese politicians constructed campaign websites, a

Table 3. Party website establishment dates

Party/data	LDP	DPJ	New Komeito	New Liberal Party	JCP	SDP
Date of website establishment[1]	January 1996	1998	August 1996	1998	April 1996	June 1995

[1] The dates given here for party website establishment are self-reported by the parties as at October/November 2000. The dates for the DPJ and the New Liberal Party website establishment differ from those noted in newspaper articles concerning the October 1996 general election. At that time, both the DPJ and the New Liberal Party already had websites.
Source: Questionnaire data.

relatively high number compared with other countries holding elections around this time (Davis, 1999; Ward and Gibson, 1998). The first website, that of the SDP, went online in June 1995, with other parties following shortly thereafter, as can be seen in Table 3, which reports the dates when parties first established their websites.

While these early efforts were fairly limited in scope, focusing on press releases, party platforms and lists of candidates and constituencies (Mainichi Interactive, 15 October 1996), their proliferation was particularly surprising given that only a small minority of Japanese voters were online at this point. Estimates from 1995 indicate an Internet population of fewer than 5 million, i.e. less than 4 percent of the general population (Japan Internet Association, 1998).

Applying Restrictions to Internet Campaigning

These days of unfettered website production proved to be numbered, however. Almost as soon as these initial efforts began, the Ministry of Public Management, Home Affairs and Posts and Communications (formerly the Ministry of Home Affairs) threatened to make them illegal under the media provisions of the POEL. Personal and party political Web pages, it was suggested, contained 'text and images' that constituted political advertising and were viewable by an 'unspecified number of people' during an official campaign activities period. The ministry warned of potential infringements of Section 142 of the POEL (Mainichi Interactive, 8 October 1996). As a result, a number of candidates voluntarily removed their websites, and parties either refrained from updating certain portions of their sites during the official campaign activities period or removed their lists of candidates and constituencies.

Shortly before the next general election in October 1996, the issue of political websites was addressed by the opposition parties. In early October 1996, the now-defunct New Party Sakigake submitted an inquiry to the government asking for clarification regarding the use of websites during election campaigns. In the inquiry, the party noted that the use of websites actually upheld the original intent of Section 142 by providing an inexpensive

means of political communication with the electorate; the party also pointed out that the information contained in such websites could benefit Japanese voters residing overseas (*Sakigake kaitogan*, 1996). The Ministry's response, handed down at the end of October 1996, compared the effect of viewing websites with that of viewing campaign advertising materials such as pamphlets. The Ministry indicated that any updates made by political parties or candidates to their websites during the official campaign activities period would be regarded as infringing the POEL (Mainichi Interactive, 30 October 1996).

Since 1996, a number of formal and informal initiatives have been taken by opposition parties regarding the 'appropriate' political use of the Internet. In the spring of 1997, the DPJ convened a study group composed of nine young representatives from the LDP, Shinshinto and DPJ parties to discuss how the Internet could be used for political activities that included providing information for Japanese voters residing overseas and determining the appropriate candidate information that should be posted on websites (Mainichi Interactive, 28 April 1997). These efforts culminated in submission of a proposed amendment by the DPJ to the Lower House on 16 June 1998 (Mainichi Interactive, 17 June 1998), a month prior to the 1998 Upper House election, to reform the POEL and allow websites to be used for election campaign activities. The proposal, however, was not acted upon.

The issue of Web campaigning resurfaced in late 1999 at the conference of party secretaries, a regular gathering attended by high-ranking party members. Officials from the LDP, New Komeito and New Liberal parties discussed the use of the Internet for campaign purposes, yet it remained the only point on which the parties could not agree (Mainichi Interactive, 4 December 1999). Although the parties agreed on five other agenda items, a rift appeared when the LDP strongly opposed use of the Internet for election campaign activities (Mainichi Interactive, 2 December 1999). Citing reasons such as 'within the voting population of 99,450,000 people, only 16 million use the Internet' and the possibilities for 'anonymous defamation should be regulated', there appeared to be strong opposition to using the Internet for campaign purposes within the LDP (Mainichi Interactive, 2 December 1999 and 4 December 1999).

Growth of Incentives for Internet Campaigning

Since then the issue of campaign websites has remained a contentious one, mired in uncertainty. While the government has continued to threaten legal action for updating websites during election periods, until the most recent legislative elections there has been no official ruling on the matter, but merely talk of potential infringements. Certainly, outside the policy realm, the incentives for both government and opposition parties to use the Web have been increasing. The most obvious of these is the dramatic growth in the online audience since 1996, as Table 4 indicates.

Table 4. Japan's Internet user population

Year	Population ('000s)[1]	Internet user population ('000s)[2]	Internet population (%)
1996	125,864	5,100	4.01
1997	126,166	8,840	7.01
1998	126,486	14,300	11.31
1999	126,686	18,300	14.45
2000	126,926	30,400	23.95
2001	127,000	36,280	28.57

Source 1: Population Census of Japan, 2001.
Source 2: Japan Internet Association 1998, 2000.

By 1999 the numbers reporting access to the Internet had trebled from the 1995 level to 16 million users, and by early 2000 close to 20 million Japanese reported access to the Internet or slightly over 15 percent of the population (Japan Internet Association, 2001). Prior to the 2001 Upper House election, estimates were being made that that figure would rise above 30 million, indicating that a quarter of the Japanese population would have access to the Internet through either PC-based or mobile-telephone devices (Japan Internet Association, 2001).

Clearly, this growth in the user base has meant that newer smaller parties have an efficient and inexpensive means by which to publicize themselves to an increasingly broader section of the electorate. Even for the more established parties, however, the Internet provides an additional channel to woo back former voters. Demographic profiles of the Internet-using population reflect a strong bias toward the young and urban dwellers, two groups currently swelling the ranks of the non-aligned (Japan Internet Association, 1998, 1999; Kawakami, 2000). Data from a survey conducted in 2000 by the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications concerning the demographic breakdown of Internet users (Table 5) shows that over 75 percent of the Internet population in Japan was concentrated in the 20- to 40-year age-range bracket.

Of course, just because people go online does not mean that they become

Table 5. Percentage of Internet users by gender and age (2000)

	Age 10–19 (%)	Age 20–29 (%)	Age 30–39 (%)	Age 40–49 (%)	Age over 50 (%)
Men	1.9	28.9	39.9	21.4	6.7
Women	3.5	50.7	35.5	7.6	2.0
Total	2.6	38.1	38.1	15.6	4.7

Source: Japan Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications, *Tsushin hakusho* (Communications White Paper), 2000.

consumers of political information, as evidence from the US and UK recent elections show.[4] However, the growth in activities of grassroots and less formalized political actors certainly suggests a burgeoning demand on the part of Japanese citizens for such material. Ideologically neutral political portal sites such as *senkyo de go (www.geocities.co.jp/WallStreet/2670/)* and *election.co.jp* (*www.election.co.jp*) were developed in advance of the 2000 elections, offering political information, links to major political parties and candidates, and Internet-based surveys. Also, in a more provocative use of the Internet, interest groups and politically aware individuals have engaged in producing email newsletters, bulletin-board services, chat groups and short-messaging systems (SMS) to promote Internet-based political dialogue. A number of groups launched 'anti-candidate' (*rakusen*) websites aimed at evaluating individual candidates and politicians and sharing information about them. One of these groups, the People's Ombudsman (*shimin ombuzuman*) reported access figures of 25,000, and a spokesperson for the group indicated surprise at the level of distrust in politics demonstrated by viewers of the site (Mainichi Interactive, 1 June 2000). Groups such as the People's Voting Forum (*jumin tohyo rippo forumu*) (*member.nifty.ne.jp/suhjy/*) and the Politician Evaluation Group (*seijko hyotei kaigi*) (*www.seijika-hyoutei.com*) posed candidate evaluations as well as lists of politicians' expenditures and sources of revenue.

The Internet Campaigns in 2000 and 2001

Given the growth of incentives for political actors to use the Web alongside the threats imposed by the POEL, the question remains as to what is happening in Japan in terms of election campaigning on the Internet. To return to our questions posed at the beginning, what exactly are the parties and their representatives doing with their sites? Are they opting for static, information-dense sites or adopting a more interactive style? And what effect, if any, is this having on party competition? Has the LDP adapted as well to the Internet as its smaller rivals? Although it has greater resources to exploit the new technology, prior to the two election campaigns of 2000 and 2001, it did not appear to be actively using the Internet for political campaigning. Finally, in a broader sense, has the threat of POEL sanctions affected parties' activities online? Do the parties and politicians actually abide by the rules or has the government's ambivalence in applying the legislation led to de facto campaigning online? To examine these questions we look at party and politician websites from the recent legislative election cycles of 2000 and 2001.

Lower House Elections, 2000

In readying themselves for the 2000 election, political parties and politicians took advantage of these changes to incorporate the Internet into their campaign communications strategies.

Candidates: In February 2000, the DPJ leader Hatoyama Yukio promoted the use of the Internet in a magazine interview, noting that websites and email could engage the electorate in direct dialogue with politicians (Netbrain, 2000). As shown by the figures in Table 6, early 2000 also marked a period in which politicians, especially those in opposition political parties, were particularly active in starting to construct websites. Whereas in 1995 only a small number of sitting politicians in the Upper and Lower Houses had personal websites (40 out of a possible 747), by 2000 this figure had grown to over 200 (see Table 6).

With this general push toward using new technology it should be noted that LDP politicians were clearly the slowest and most resistant to incorporating Web communication in their campaign. Indeed, the inertia was so striking that in late March 2000, former LDP Prime Minister Mori personally urged LDP politicians and candidates to establish websites in preparation for the upcoming Lower House election.

Parties: If we examine how the parties performed during the same period, we can see that in the 2000 election cycle all parties demonstrated a certain uniformity. Websites were updated daily, and information on party organization, policies and candidates was provided along with opportunities for viewers to contact each party directly through email (see Table 7).

Despite these basic similarities, however, it was the two largest opposition parties that emerged as the most experimental and enthusiastic users of the new media. The DPJ and New Komeito parties diverted a great deal of effort into their use of the Internet, using their sites to target key voting groups such as younger voters, women and those dwelling in urban areas. Both parties posted prominent banners with links to specific pages of their websites aimed at these voting groups. The DPJ created an election-specific site (*www.minshu2000.com*) that included the results of an instant issue poll and a list of merits of using the Internet for political purposes. Overall, the DPJ and New Komeito parties offered the most varied range of Internet functions either through their main party sites or election-specific sections.

Table 6. Diet members with websites and Internet user population in Japan (1996–2000)

Date	Number of sitting Diet members with websites (Upper and Lower Houses combined, Total = 747)				Japan's Internet user population (%)
October 1996	40				4.01
April 1997	78				7.01
June 1998	108				11.31
Date/party	*LDP*	*DPJ*	*New Komeito*	*New Liberal Party*	
February 2000	33% (80/239)	88% (46/52)	50% (13/26)	Not available	14.45
June 2001	40% (108/287)	65% (62/98)	50% (28/55)	60% (16/27)	28.57

Source: Mainichi Interactive, 1996, 1997, 1998, 1999, 2000 (see References section for

Table 7. Comparative website features 2000–2001

	LDP		DPJ		New Komeito		New Liberal Party		JCP		SDP	
	2000	*2001*	*2000*	*2001*	*2000*	*2001*	*2000*	*2001*	*2000*	*2001*	*2000*	*2001*
Specific election site or section	Section	Section	Site	Section	Section	Section	Section	Section	No	Section	No	No
References to other parties on the top page	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No	No
Links to other parties	No	No	Major and minor parties	Major and minor parties	No	Major and minor parties	No	No	No	No	No	No
Candidate profiles and constituency listings	Yes	Yes	No	Select	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Targeted voting groups	Women, youth, urban voters	Women, youth, urban voters	Women, urban voters	Women, youth, urban voters	Youth	Women, youth	No	No	No	Women, youth	No	No
Links to candidate sites	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fixed-computer based email newsletters	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No
i-mode website	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	Select	No	No
i-mode newsletter	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No
Cross-media	Audio messages	TV commercials, i-mode	Audio messages, TV commercials, Internet broadcasts, i-mode	Audio messages, TV commercials, site-exclusive broadcasting, i-mode	TV commercials	TV commercials, i-mode	TV commercials	TV commercials	No	i-mode	TV commercials	TV commercials
Financial contributions	Not direct (through publications)	Credit card	Contributions, membership, publications	Credit card	No	No	No	No	Contributions to new bldg., membership, publications	No	No	No

In addition to audio messages, TV commercials and instant interactive polls, the DPJ also participated in live broadcast events and was the first party to offer both HTML-based and cellular telephone or 'i-mode'[5] versions of its main party website.

While the LDP also made effective use of the Web, perhaps its most notable experimentation with the medium during 2000 came outside the election campaign, when faction leader Kato Koichi, spurred on by support received through his website, attempted to unseat former Prime Minister Mori Yoshiro as party leader in November 2000. Although the attempt failed, Koichi's experience prompted the LDP to see that the Internet was more than simply another tool for election campaigning. While the difficulties in transferring 'online' or 'virtual' support to the 'offline' arena were apparent (*Senkyo*, 2000), it was clear that the Internet could be used as a tool by which to gauge popular support and establish a continuous relationship with the electorate outside election campaign periods. Indeed, shortly afterwards, in the spring of 2001, Prime Minister Koizumi made extensive use of his website to build support within the LDP, and went on to win the party's internal leadership race. Flushed by this success, in late May 2001 the Prime Minister started distributing a weekly email newsletter through the official Prime Minister's Office website that quickly proved highly popular, garnering a subscription base of 2 million within two months of its inception (Video Research, 2001).

Upper House Elections, 2001

Although not a great amount had changed by the 2001 campaign for the Upper House, parties were clearly beginning to favour featuring leaders on their websites and more direct communications with the electorate through email, especially regularly produced news updates (see Table 7). The LDP website featured large graphics of the new Prime Minister and offered a weekly party-based email newsletter. The DPJ and New Komeito sites were also redesigned to focus attention on their respective party leaders. Although all parties continued to post their election platforms, candidate and constituency listings and television commercials on their sites, they also added more cross-media features, such as cellular-phone-based versions of their websites and email newsletters. Furthermore, following revisions in the laws regarding campaign donations, starting in late June 2001 the LDP and DPJ parties provided functions on their main websites and i-mode websites for credit card donations.

The Role of the POEL

Overall, the issue of the relationship between the information contained on websites and the POEL remained unresolved. During both election periods,

the issue of the Internet and the POEL repeatedly surfaced. It was clear that the use of new media by parties and candidates was expanding beyond the government's current interpretation of the Internet. While none of the parties made very active use of the Web for campaigning during the official election periods in 2000 and 2001,[6] almost none of the sites remained totally static. In the 2000 Lower House election, all parties except the Liberal Party updated at least the top pages of their sites with current events information regarding current events. During the 2001 Upper House election campaign period, parties continued this practice. Also during the official campaign activities period in 2001, parties refrained from changing the candidate and constituency information on their websites, although the newly produced email newsletters (in either fixed-PC or cellular-phone format) continued distribution throughout the official campaign activities period. In addition, a number of candidates continued to circulate private email newsletters. Independently run bulletin-board services, chat rooms and mailing lists also continued to engage in political discussion throughout the entire campaign period.

In the face of the growing public interest in the medium and awareness of its potential as a political campaign means, the government commissioned a deliberative council to recommend revisions to the POEL in October 2001. Led by Professor Kabashima Ikuo of the University of Tokyo, the council is currently examining the use of the Internet by political actors in other countries and considering separating Internet functions such as websites and email (Council on Campaign Activities in the Internet Era, 2002). Although the council's final report is not expected until approximately mid-2002, it is clear that the way the Internet has been used during the past two election campaigns, as well as its growing popularity in Japan, has led to potential changes in existing campaign media legislation.

Conclusion: The Future of the Political Internet in Japan

From this brief analysis of the experimentation of parties and politicians with new ICTs in Japan it is apparent that the new media is not only changing the nature of political communication but may ultimately produce far-reaching change in government policy and party system dynamics. As in other countries, the Internet is clearly opening up new channels for smaller parties, candidates, interest groups and politically aware individuals to reach the public. In Japan, however, such opportunities have occurred during a period of considerable upheaval within the party system and have been subject to a highly restrictive set of rules designed for a different, more centralized media age. These conditions have meant that opposition parties' calls for the lifting of restrictions on political communication on the Internet have gained a strength and momentum not seen in other national contexts.

Overall, therefore, the findings from Japan appear to provide significant

support for some of the key contentions regarding parties' use of the Internet and its consequences. First, these findings confirm the Internet's appeal for non-established political forces. The opposition parties and newer parties in particular clearly proved the most vocal in their demands for more free and open use of the new media. As the incumbent party, the LDP was equally notable for its initial strong resistance to such ideas. Second, and perhaps more significantly, these findings provide some practical or empirical evidence to support the idea that the Internet can serve as an agent for political change. The establishment of the deliberative council in late 2001, for instance, appears to demonstrate this most clearly, with elites not being able to resist the calls for review of the existing media legislation.

While one might be tempted to carry these conclusions forward to argue that the Japanese experience shows the inherently democratizing tendencies of the new ICTs, one should caution against such an interpretation. Although the technology provided a strong impetus to the calls for legislative and systemic reform in Japan, it was the existing configuration of political forces that opened the way for such change. The combination of a regime open to democratic opposition but exerting moderate repression over traditional media created an environment conducive to aggressive and challenging uses of the new media. On a broader level, therefore, these findings are suggestive of the importance of context in determining the magnitude of the Internet's impact on society. Internet technology undoubtedly contains the potential to enact widespread changes on the way that a society organizes itself. Unlocking that potential to significant effect, however, depends ultimately on the right social and institutional conditions.

Notes

1 For the UK, see Rachel Gibson and Stephen J. Ward (1998); for The Netherlands, see Pieter W. Tops et al. (2000); for Italy, see James L. Newell et al. (2000); for the USA, see Gary W. Selnow (1998), Kevin A. Hill and John E. Hughes (1998) and Michael Margolis et al. (1997, 1999).
2 Although there has been little action on the national level by independent candidates with regard to using the Internet, since 2000 a number of gubernatorial candidates have credited at least part of their victory to public support cultivated through the Internet. Examples include Nagano Governor Tanaka Yasuo (elected October 2000 and re-elected in September 2002), who used his website to focus protest against the construction of a new dam in his prefecture. The Internet was a particularly popular medium of choice for candidates in the Chiba gubernatorial election held in March 2001. Successful candidate Domoto Akiko used her website to provide detailed information regarding her policies and to solicit opinions from voters.
3 The parties were selected on the basis of representation in the Upper and Lower Houses of Japan's Diet as of February 2000. Each party's website was examined daily during the period 15 May to 25 July 2000 for the 2000 Lower House election, and from 25 June to 10 August 2001 for the 2001 Upper House election.

In addition to the website analysis, a questionnaire regarding Internet use was distributed to each party in September 2000, and the parties were contacted and participated in follow-up interviews that were conducted in October and November 2000.

4 A December 2000 report produced by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press noted that although there is a growing audience for online political information, only 18 percent of the general public in the USA actively sought such information through the Internet (Pew Research Center, 2000). Furthermore, a 2001 report compiled for the iSociety noted that a majority of UK voters were unsure of the merits of using the Internet to gather political online information and felt overloaded with election information available through various media (Crabtree, 2001).

5 Introduced in 1999 by Docomo, a subsidiary of Nippon Telegraph and Telecommunications (NTT), 'i-mode' is a proprietary protocol that is available through cellular phones by subscription. It is similar to 'short-messaging systems' (SMS) provided by European telecommunications carriers.

6 The official election campaign activities period for the 2000 Lower House election was 13 June to 25 June 2000 (election day). For the 2001 Upper House election, the period was 15 July to 29 July 2001 (election day).

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