# FRIENDS, TWEETS, AND YOUTUBE: NEW DIRECTIONS IN ONLINE CAMPAIGNING IN JAPAN

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## Introduction

In today's modern political campaigns, the internet has become an indispensable campaign communications tool for political parties, politicians, and candidates. Yet for Japanese political actors, from the mid-1990s, the POEL (Public Offices Election Law), a vastly comprehensive law governing all aspects of political campaigning, has banned Internet use in the critical campaign period immediately prior to elections. Relying on traditional campaigning tools including street speeches, handbills, posters, and word of mouth, supplemented by publicly funded yet officially limited advertising through mass media channels, Japanese candidates have yearned for changes in the legislation to allow internet-based campaigning for almost 20 years.

This change finally occurred in April 2013. With amendments to the POEL to allow political parties, candidates, and voters to use SNS (social networking services) and conduct campaign communications activities via email during the period prior to election day, the Japanese political websphere finally caught up to the internet in time for the 2013 Upper House election in July. Yet for many political parties and candidates, challenges still remained in how to effectively use web-based campaigning, personalize their campaign strategies, and create a political "brand" for themselves in an increasing diverse internet environment.

This paper has two main objectives that lie in the intersection between theory and practice in investigating Japan's new political websphere. First, from a theoretical perspective, this paper identifies online strategies that appeared in the 2013 Upper House election in Japan in order to assess professionalization in campaigning (often referred to as the "Americanization" of political campaigns). While prior to 2013 it was particularly challenging to evaluate professionalism in Japanese political campaigns under the old restrictions in the POEL, the lifting of the ban on internet-based campaigning has ushered in a new era in political campaign communication in Japan. In particular, this paper examines candidate and political party use of the internet in terms of media segmentation, campaign personalization, and campaign branding strategies.

Second, from a practical viewpoint, this paper explores the extent to which political parties and candidates utilized internet- and mobile-media tools during the 2013 campaign in terms of party affiliation. With political parties and candidates continuing to offer web-based information through "traditional" online means including websites, blogs, and email, in the 2013 election cycle, they also experimented with video (through Youtube and other video channels) as well as social networking services such as Twitter and Facebook. With the expansion of media channels, a range of third-party actors in the Japanese online electoral sphere emerged with the active participation of the national election management board and online advertisers. By investigating the online Japanese electoral environment through theoretical and practical perspectives, this paper describes how the Japanese political websphere has entered a new phase of online campaigning with multiple online delivery channels.

**Studies in Online Campaigning**

To date, studies in online campaigning have taken multiple trajectories. Early studies in the mid- to late 1990s investigated the impact of technological innovations on campaign practices (Gibson et al., 2003a, Margolis, et al., 1997, Gibson et al., 2003b), often concluding that campaign internet use tended to mirror offline political practices. Institutional parameters, including actor networks and legal restrictions have also been explored to assess how web-based campaigns have been incorporated into existing political environments (Anstead and Chadwick, 2009, Foot et al., 2007). Studies in professionalism in political campaigns approached online campaigning from a political marketing perspective, with online campaigning being regarded as an extension of traditional political marketing techniques (Farrell and Webb, 2000, Stromback, 2007). With the rise in popularity of SNS tools in the late 2000s, online campaigning has taken new directions in rapid dissemination of campaign information and increased voter involvement (Vesnic-Alujevic, 2013, Vergeer, 2013, Williams & Gulati, 2013).

Most studies in online campaigning have occurred in national contexts that do not legislate its use during political campaigns periods. Japan presents a special case in this regard as prior to April 2013, Japan's POEL restricted online campaigning with the aim of levelling the playing field among candidates in Japan's postwar multi-member medium-sized electoral districts where two to six candidates of the same party competed for seats. Strictly legislating the distribution of campaign-related materials and candidate-centered political advertising, the POEL distinguished between "political activities" and "campaign activities" and, prior to April 2013, candidates were banned from updating their websites after filing their candidatures and were prevented from using their websites, video websites, and social media during the period immediately prior to election day (Tkach-Kawasaki, 2003). However, despite such restrictions, since the early 2000s, in each national election cycle, increasing numbers of politicians have created an internet-based presence (Tkach-Kawasaki, 2011).

In this unique political websphere, research on the online environment for Japanese political parties and candidates have tended to focus on party competition (Tkach-Kawasaki, 2003), the involvement of multiple actors (Tkach-Kawasaki, 2007), voter involvement (Kobayashi, 2009), and the historical influence of the POEL (Tkach-Kawasaki, 2011). In April 2013, the POEL was amended to allow political parties,

candidates, and voters to conduct campaign-related activities using websites and SNS, but maintained restrictions in distributing election-related handbills or flyers. With the lifting of the ban on web-based campaigning, assessing web-based campaigning during the 2013 Upper House election reveals certain trends in this new era of online political engagement in Japan.

## Method

During the period July 5 to 20, 2013, official political party and candidate websites, as well as official Facebook sites were archived using a web archiving program (Metaproducts Offline Explorer). Candidates' Twitter feeds were also gathered during the same time period. Party and candidate websites are currently being coded using content analysis techniques and the results are forthcoming.

## Preliminary Results: Japan's First "Net Election"

Table 1 shows the breakdown of candidate use of internet-based tools for campaigning in July 2013 (preliminary results). In terms of "traditional" online presence, measured by the number and percentage of candidates with websites, trends noted earlier of increasing use with each election cycle have continued.

Table 1 Candidate use of Internet-based media in the 2013 Upper House election

| Candidate party affiliation | Candidates (N) | Websites (N) (%) | Twitter (N) (%) | Facebook (N) (%) | Video (N) (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) | 80 | 79 (98.8) | 45 (56.3) | 76 (95.0) | 28 (35.0) |
| Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) | 56 | 56 (100) | 36 (64.3) | 54 (96.4) | 26 (46.4) |
| New Komei Party | 21 | 10 (47.6) | 11 (52.4) | 11 (52.4) | 9 (42.9) |
| Your Party (*Minna-no tō*) | 34 | 34 (100) | 32 (94.1) | 34 (100) | 12 (35.3) |
| People's Life Party (*Seikatsu-no tō*) | 11 | 11 (100) | 11 (100) | 10 (90.9) | 6 (54.5) |
| Japan Communist Party (JCP) | 63 | 60 (95.2) | 57 (90.5) | 51 (81.0) | 17 (27.0) |
| Social Democratic Party (SDP) | 9 | 7 (77.8) | 6 (66.7) | 6 (66.7) | 4 (44.4) |
| Green Wind (*Midori no kaze*) | 9 | 9 (100) | 8 (88.9) | 8 (88.9) | 2 (22.2) |
| Restoration Party (*Ishin-no kai*) | 47 | 46 (97.9) | 42 (89.4) | 47 (100) | 18 (38.3) |
| New Party Daiichi | 11 | 8 (72.7) | 5 (45.5) | 8 (72.7) | 3 (27.3) |
| Green Party (*Midori-no tō*) | 8 | 8 (100) | 7 (87.5) | 8 (100) | 1 (12.5) |
| Other small parties | 60 | 57 (95.0) | 38 (63.3) | 45 (75.0) | 20 (33.3) |
| Non-affiliated | 26 | 18 (69.2) | 13 (50.0) | 13 (50.0) | 0 (0) |
| **Total** | **435** | **403** | **311** | **371** | **146** |
| (Percentage of total) | **(100%)** | **(92.6%)** | **(71.5%)** | **(85.3%)** | **(33.6%)** |

Among SNS, Facebook was the most popular overall with 85.3% of all candidates having either official (updated by their campaign offices) or personal pages. Facebook

use was particularly high among major-party candidates (LDP and DPJ candidates), but also quite high for candidates from parties that were proactive in using other social media channels (for example, the Restoration Party and the People's Life Party). Twitter was the also popular with over 70% of candidates. However, in contrast from Facebook, candidates from minor or relatively new political parties, such as Your Party, the People's Life Party, the JCP, the Green Wind party, the Restoration Party, and the Green Party, made extensive use of Twitter for campaigning. Although not shown in Table 1, candidates from relatively rural prefectures were more likely to use Facebook, whereas Twitter was mainly popular with candidates from urban-based electoral districts such as Tokyo, Osaka, and Kyoto.

In response to changes in the POEL that allowed candidates to utilize video-sharing websites such as Youtube, UStream, or Nico Nico Dōga (a popular Japanese video-sharing website), roughly one-

third of the candidates took advantage of this medium to post campaign speeches or special messages to the voters. However, possibly owing to production costs and privacy concerns, this medium was less popular among candidates than other new-media channels.

Finally, in terms of candidate uptake overall, candidates from small newer parties that mainly campaigned in urban districts, such as those from Your Party, the People's Life Party, the Green Wind party, the Restoration Party, and the Green Party were the most proactive in combining traditional website-based campaign methods with new social media channels. Many candidates (results forthcoming) from these parties were new candidates rather than incumbents, and using all possible media channels to advance their name recognition and construct a brand image were key points in their online media campaign strategies. In comparison, candidates from older established political parties such as the LDP and the DPJ demonstrated more caution in using SNS-based campaigning. Rather than an all-out social-media blitz, candidates from these parties used social media in general — and Facebook in particular — as an extension of personal networks quite possibly forged through traditional campaign practices in Japan such as their local support networks.

**Discussion of Preliminary Results**

While complete results are forthcoming, a rudimentary analysis of the collected website, Facebook, and Twitter data demonstrates three trends in candidate website and SNS use. First, in terms of media segmentation strategy, websites were used for static in-depth policy-related information and background profile. In contrast, SNS channels were often used to promote speeches and scheduling (Twitter), as well as event photographs and extensions of personal networks (Facebook). Campaign personalization techniques such as targeting voters through video (mainly Youtube channels) and "friending" and "liking" (Facebook) were also present. Finally, in efforts to brand themselves, logos and caricatures were also popular among candidates who utilized multiple online means (website, blog, Facebook, and Twitter). Although these are only preliminary results, the combination of the presence of these features suggest that with the changes to the POEL to allow for online campaigning, the Japanese electoral websphere has entered

an era of campaign professionalization.

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