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## **Campaigning for the Japanese Lower House: From Mobilising to Chasing Voters?**

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# **Campaigning for the Japanese Lower House: From Mobilising to Chasing Voters?**

## **Abstract**

Electioneering for the Japanese Lower House has undergone significant changes in recent years. Not only institutional but also other environmental changes are pushing political actors in Japan to complement the hitherto dominant vote-mobilisation approach by vote-chasing strategies. Such strategies target in particular unaffiliated voters and emphasise party leaders. Yet, the notion of an 'Americanisation' of campaigning in Japan seems premature at best. Notably, electioneering for the Lower House has become more party-oriented in the course of introducing new voter chasing strategies. It remains to be seen though whether specific campaign instruments and tactics used in recent general elections, such as the manifesto approach, can generate value-added in the longer term.

**Key words:** Election campaigning, mixed-member electoral system, voter targeting, Americanisation thesis, Japan.

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## Zusammenfassung

### **Wahlkampf für das japanische Unterhaus: Von der Mobilisierung zur Jagd auf Wählerstimmen?**

Der Wahlkampf für das japanische Unterhaus hat sich in den vergangenen Jahren in bedeutsamer Weise verändert. Nicht allein institutionelle, sondern auch andere Umweltveränderungen veranlassen parteipolitische Akteure dazu, den bisher dominanten Stimmenmobilisierungsansatz durch Strategien zur Jagd auf Wählerstimmen (*vote chasing*) zu ergänzen. Solche Strategien zielen insbesondere auf parteiungebundene Wähler ab und rücken Parteiführer in den Mittelpunkt. Indes kann von einer „Amerikanisierung“ von Wahlkämpfen in Japan kaum die Rede sein. So sind Wahlkämpfe im Zuge der Einführung neuer Strategien zur Jagd auf Wählerstimmen tendenziell parteizentrierter geworden. Offen muss zunächst bleiben, ob spezifische Wahlkampfinstrumente und -taktiken, die bei allgemeinen Wahlen der jüngeren Zeit Einsatz gefunden haben – wie etwa der Manifest-Ansatz – nachhaltig Wirkung entfalten werden.

# Campaigning for the Japanese Lower House: From Mobilising to Chasing Voters?

Patrick Köllner

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## 1. Introduction

Elections campaigns for the Lower House, the more important chamber of Japan's bicameral parliament, have undergone significant changes in recent years. Well into the 1990s, election campaigning for the Lower House was characterised by a distinct emphasis on voter mobilisation. Campaigning was largely a local-level affair which centred on individual candidates' attempts to obtain a sufficient percentage of votes in their relevant electoral districts. Candidates relied on vote mobilisation qua local networks and organisations and, especially in the case of government-linked candidates, on promises to deliver 'pork' to constituencies. Individual candidates extensively used personal support organisations for pre-campaigning activities and for cultivating links with voters in between elections. While the salience of na-

tional issues and party leaders varied depending on the particular election, national election platforms did not play a substantial role for most parties in Lower House campaigns. Starting with the 2003 Lower House election, however, election manifestos have begun to figure prominently in general elections in Japan. Contested issues in national politics have moved into the centre of the official campaign discourse. The 2005 general election also saw a centralised and well-orchestrated campaign management on the part of Japan's dominant party, the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP).

How can we explain the advent of new campaign instruments and tactics in recent Lower House elections? Does the new emphasis on national-level campaign activities signal a full-scale re-orientation of election campaigning in Japan? Is the country falling in line with campaign practices in other mature democracies? It is these questions that the present paper will try to answer, if only tentatively. The paper is structured as follows. In the following section of the paper we summarise some of the main themes and insights of the literature on election campaigning in advanced democracies. We then turn to the Japanese case and highlight the core characteristics of election campaigning for the Lower House until the 1990s. In the fourth section of the paper we highlight key features of the mixed-member electoral system used for the Lower House since 1996 and its expected consequences for campaigning. We then discuss how electioneering for the Lower House has developed in recent times. In the sixth section of the paper we offer explanations for the changing campaign behaviour in today's Japan. We argue that not only institutional but also other environmental changes are pushing political actors in Japan to complement the hitherto dominant vote-mobilisation approach by vote-chasing strategies. The paper closes by suggesting future avenues for research on election campaigning in Japan. In particular we emphasise the need for more in-depth and comparative analyses of Japanese campaign orientations and practices.

## **2. Strategies for Targeting Voters and the 'Americanisation' Debate**

How do parties target voters? Drawing on various strands in the electoral politics literature, Rohrschneider (2002: 376) has posited five potential trade-offs for campaign strategists. First, should the campaign activities be geared towards maximising votes by going for the median voter or should the representation of distinct policies be emphasised? Second, should the campaign aim at mobilising the party's core constituency or should unaligned voters be targeted? Third, should the campaign rely on a given ideological programme or on modern technology such as polls and focus groups? Fourth, should the campaign focus on a party leader or on (intra-party) constituencies? And fourth, should the party organisation be treated in the campaign as a symbol or as a mechanism? Given these trade-offs, Rohrschnei-

der (2002: 376-377) suggests that voter targeting strategies of political parties and candidates constitute a continuum with a straight forward mobilising strategy at the one hand and an equally straight forward chasing strategy at the other hand. According to Rohrschneider (ibid.), the ideal-typical mobilising strategy is motivated primarily by policies, focuses on reaching core voters, relies primarily on party's ideological heritage, emphasizes predominantly a party's core constituencies, and views organisations as instruments to contact voters. On the other hand, the ideal-typical chasing strategy aims at maximising the vote share, targets predominantly unaligned voters, emphasises modern technology not ideology, tends to emphasise leaders, and views organisational innovation as part of the campaign theme.

Rohrschneider's categorisation of targeting strategies is of substantial value in heuristic and analytical terms. Note must however be taken of its underlying 'Occidental' bias which reflects the empirical grounding of most electoral politics literature in 'Western' (i.e. European and North American) experiences with parties and elections. As a consequence, much is made of parties' policy orientations and ideological programmes or more recent trends in terms of broadening participatory opportunities for party members and/or supporters. What often gets neglected in the literature are, *inter alia*, clientelist linkages of political parties which figure not only prominently in many non-Western settings but also in parts of Europe (cf. Piattoni 2001; Betz et al. 2004; Basedau et al. 2007; Kitschelt/Wilkinson 2007). It follows that the policy-motivation of ideal-typical mobilising strategies should not be taken as a given but solely as a possibility. Moreover, to the reliance on parties' ideological heritage should be added reliance on clientelism and patronage as another distinct option. Finally, with respect to ideal-typical chasing strategies, the organisational innovation component should not be emphasised too much as it might well be only applicable to a limited number of international settings.

These necessary qualifications of Rohrschneider's categorisation of targeting strategies aside, the interesting question remains what explains parties' locations on the mobilising/chasing continuum? Rohrschneider (2002: 377-378) himself suggests that the relevant independent variables include institutional and party system characteristics, demand side characteristics (including the size of well-defined social groups), and parties' structure (including the relative strength of intra-party groups and coalitions). Several hypotheses can be advanced on this basis, three of which will interest us further with respect to the Japanese case: First, majoritarian electoral systems increase incentives to pursue chasing strategies because they force major parties to compete for unaligned voters whereas core supporters have few alternatives but supporting their party. Conversely, proportional electoral systems provide for greater or at least countervailing incentives to mobilise core voters in order to avoid defections to parties with related ideological profiles. Second, the larger and better or-

ganised social groups are with which parties can link, the higher the incentive to pursue mobilising strategies. Conversely, the higher the proportion of unaligned voters, the higher the incentive to pursue chasing strategies. Third, the more diverse and internally complex parties are, the more they will be inclined to cater to intra-party constituencies and to mobilize voter groups linked to these constituencies. Conversely, the more centralised parties are, the more they will be inclined to pursue leader-oriented chasing strategies.

We will come back to these hypotheses later in the context of the Japanese case. For now, we shift attention to another relevant strand in the literature on electoral politics, viz. the so-called 'Americanisation' debate. At the core of this debate lies the question of whether transnational trends shaping modern political communications lead not only to a homogenisation of campaign styles but of political communications at large. In an age of 'media democracy', political communications have to follow the publicity-oriented selection and attention-fixing rules of the media – or so it has been argued (Pfetsch 2001: 27). According to Mancini and Swanson (1996), who popularised the 'Americanisation' hypothesis, modern campaign communication is affected by five broad trends or characteristics, i.e. the personalization of politics, the 'scientificization' of politics, the detachment of parties from citizens and the substitution of interpersonal contact by opinion polls, autonomous structures of communication in which the mass media act independently, and finally the citizen becoming a spectator following the political spectacle.

Regardless of whether these are truly universal trends, numerous scholars have noted that election campaigns in established 'Western' democracies have undergone significant changes in the past couple of decades. In the early 1990s, Butler and Ranney (1992: 281) pointed to the declining importance of 'low-tech' methods such as circulating written documents, door-to-door canvassing, holding public meetings, using billboards, posters and newspaper ads and door-knocking on election day. They argued that in the television age, coverage has become the campaign while the role of the media has changed from channel of communication to major actor in the campaigning process (ibid.: 281-282, see also Farrell 1996: 173-175). In a related vein, Semetko (2006: 517) has noted that one of the main challenges facing parties today, consists of keeping up with the changes in the media industry and the ongoing development in the national communications landscape, and the implications of these changes for making connections with audiences and potential voters. In the US context, Green and Smith (2003: 322) observe a concomitant 'professionalisation' of electoral campaigns, 'encompass[ing] a broad array of interrelated phenomena, ranging from the manner in which campaigns are conducted to the specialization of tasks'. This professionalisation coincided with technological innovations such as computerisation, phone banks and the Internet which hastened the transformation of parties and campaigns.



Campaign professionalisation has certainly not been confined to the United States or other countries with presidential systems of government. Analysts of electoral campaigns in Western Europe, where cabinet systems dominate, have equally pointed to professionalisation or modernisation tendencies centring around technical changes – foremost the advent of the Internet –, resource and personnel changes including the use of outside agencies, consultants, and the redefinition of party staff.<sup>1</sup> As Farrell and Webb (2000: 123) have noted, parties in Western Europe ‘have tended to become more centralized and professionalized, they have become more cognizant of citizen opinion and demands, and party and (especially) leader image has come to assume a prominent thematic role in campaigning’. Notably there has been a vibrant debate on the supposed ‘presidentialisation’ of electoral campaigns and politics more generally in Western Europe’s parliamentary systems (cf. Farrell 2002: 81 and most recently Poguntke and Webb 2005).

Do moves to establish full-time campaign units in parties, a media emphasis on ‘horse races’, the important role of campaign specialists and agencies in election campaigns, the shift of the campaign focus on the party leader, the increasing need of party leaders for self-promotion in the media, and the increased usage of alternative means (including chat shows) for making contact with the voter<sup>2</sup> signal a full-scale convergence, i.e. the ‘Americanisation’ of election campaigns in Western Europe? The answer seems to be ‘no’. Rather than a drastic shift toward marketing strategies in campaigning, observers have noted a selective ‘shopping’ approach, in other words a selective use and indeed adaption of US campaign orientations and practices (cf. Farrell 2002: 69, 82; Plasser 2002: ch. 2; Holtz-Bacha 2003: 226). As Farrell (2002: 83) has argued, while campaigns may have become more candidate-focused in Western Europe, ‘in their fundamentals they have remained party-coated’.

What comparative analyses of election campaigns in Western Europe and elsewhere show is that the diffusion of ‘US style campaigning’ is affected by environmental filters or mediating conditions. In short: context matters, and institutional and media context matters particularly. Context specific factors affect the design of campaigns and their effects. Structural filters for campaign practices include the local regulatory regime including electoral laws, the distinct characteristics of party systems, of governmental structures, of media structures, of technical developments and last but not least of the electorate. Moreover, local politico-cultural traits affect the willingness to adopt US campaigning methods. As a consequence, some environments have proven to be more amenable to the adoption of US style campaigns than others.<sup>3</sup> Political communication cultures continue to differ across the Atlantic, reflecting *inter alia* the existence of strong political parties and in some cases also the still im-

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1 For good overviews see Farrell (1996: 175-179, 2002: 76-81), Farrell/Webb (2000: 108-122), Norris (2002: 133-135, 139-141).

2 See Farrell (2006: 125-130), Farrell/Webb (2000: 115-122), Swanson (2003: 50-1), and Semetko (2006: 518).

3 See Farrell (1996: 162-164, 2002: 69-75, 82-3), Norris (2002: 128-9, 142-6), Plasser (2002: ch. 4), and Holtz-Bacha (2003: 224-5).

portant role of public media and the printed press in Western Europe (cf. Pfetsch 2001: 30-1, 2003: 355-63; Holtz-Bacha 2003: 225). Comparative research has underlined what Mancini and Swanson (1996: 4) suggested more than ten years ago, viz. that 'Americanisation' can serve as a reference point for election campaigning but not more.<sup>4</sup> With this in mind, let us now turn to the Japanese case.

### 3. Election Campaigning in Japan as We Knew It

While, as noted by Rohrschneider (2002: 367), there is a dearth of academic works on how election campaigns are run worldwide, the literature on Japanese politics has provided a significant number of insightful studies on campaign behaviour. Starting with Richardson's studies on Upper House elections and local politics (Richardson 1967a, 1967b) and Curtis' 1971 study on 'election campaigning Japanese style', numerous studies have dealt with electioneering in Japan. As Richardson and Patterson (2001: 94) have noted, electoral mobilisation – an understudied topic elsewhere – constitutes a major theme in the literature on Japanese politics.

Why is it that electoral mobilisation has received so much emphasis? While Richardson and Patterson (*ibid.*: 96) point to the importance of micro-context variables such as constituency service and the importance of local personalities, other scholars have emphasised the incentives and disincentives emanating both from the national electoral system in place until 1994, the single non-transferable voting system (SNTV), and from Japan's fairly restrictive regulations on campaign activities. As electoral systems specialists have argued, SNTV provides incentives for localised and personalised campaigning in general and for establishing vote-gathering 'machines' in particular (cf. Ramseyer/McCall Rosenbluth 1993: 20-28; Reed 1994; Cox/Thies 1998; Grofman 1999). Where, as in Japan until 1993, elections are fought in local districts with on average five viable candidates who compete for the on average available four seats from that district, it makes sense to organise personal followings and corresponding vote-banks to secure the necessary 15 to 20 percent of votes needed to get elected. Moreover, campaign regulations which, *inter alia*, do not permit door-to-door canvassing, limit the official campaign period to a mere two weeks, and regulate in detail the number and format of promotional material, but which, on the other hand, are fairly liberal with regard to 'political activities' in the non-campaign period, equally provide incentives to concentrate on building local networks and permanent candidate support organisations (*kōenkai*) (cf. Curtis 1992: 225-26, 228; Christensen 1998: 991; Klein 2006b: 264-5).

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4 See also Farrell (2002: 68) on this point.

Most students of Japanese politics would probably agree with Curtis (1992: 226-229)<sup>5</sup> that campaigning for Lower House elections until the early 1990s was characterised by the following:

- a general emphasis on mobilising votes,
- a centrality of candidate campaigns at the local level ('personalism and localism'),
- a heavy reliance on local and regional networks and organisations,
- pre-campaign campaigning on the basis of personal support organisations,
- promises (esp. by government-linked candidates) to deliver 'pork' to constituencies,
- a limited role of party programmes,
- a limited role of political consultants,
- a varying salience of national issues and party leaders depending on the particular election (but probably growing in importance over time).

Before we discuss change and continuity in election campaigning for Japan's Lower House in the early 21st century, we have to address the 1994 introduction of a mixed-member electoral system for Japan's Lower House which has given rise to a number of predictions concerning the future course of campaigning in Japan.

#### 4. The Mixed-Member Electoral System in Japan and its Expected Consequences

Political reform bills enacted in early 1994 in Japan led to a shift of the Lower House election system from SNTV to a mixed electoral system, more restrictive regulations governing the financing of political activities, and finally the introduction of public subsidies for political parties.<sup>6</sup> We will concentrate here on the first aspect. Starting with the 1996 Lower House election, voters were given two votes: one for an individual candidate who would represent their local electoral district in the Lower House, and another one for a party list in the relevant region in Japan. The new electoral system combines a majoritarian component, i.e. the single-past-the-post system in local single-member districts (SMDs), and a proportional-representation component for determining the Lower House Diet members elected on the basis of regional party lists. The majoritarian component carries more weight as 300 Lower House members are thus elected while only 200 (180 from 2000 on) are elected from party lists. As a consequence, Japan's electoral system has been said to belong to the group of mixed-member majoritarian systems (Reed/Thies 2001b: 383; Reed 2005: 281-282).

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5 For illustrative case studies of individual candidates' vote-gathering strategies in the 1980s and early 1990s, see Fukui/Fukai (1999, 2000).

6 For background on the introduction of the reform measures see e.g. Curtis (1999: ch. 4); Reed/Thies (2001b); Thies (2002: 94-97).

In theory, both components of the 'new' Japanese electoral system work independently of each other. In reality, political scientists have noted interaction or 'contamination' effects between the two components. These effects are caused, *inter alia*, by the fact that candidates can compete both in SMDs and on party lists. Party lists are closed, i.e. parties rank the candidates on their regional lists. Voters cannot express a preference for a certain candidate on a list. Parties can however – and have done so frequently since 1996 – rank individual candidates at the same position on a list. If a party does not receive a sufficient number of votes to get all candidates at the same position on a list elected, the so called 'best-loser provision' is applied to determine which candidates will become members of the Lower House. This provision means that those candidates having encountered the narrowest defeats in SMDs – in percentage terms, not in terms of the absolute number of votes – will get a seat in the Lower House (cf. McKean/Scheiner 2000: 451-2; Cox/Schoppa 2002: 1038; Reed 2005: 282). Where double-candidacies exist, the competition for votes effectively transcends the distinction between SMDs and proportional representation.

Notably the institutional framework governing elections did not change in its entirety. Campaign regulations remained basically the same, i.e. the manifold restrictions mentioned above continue to exist while the official campaign period got even further shortened to 12 days. In 2003, campaign regulations were however revised to allow in national elections for the distribution of party pamphlets, so-called manifestos, during the official campaign period. The introduction of the mixed-member electoral system for the Lower House, coupled as it was with a large degree of continuity in terms of campaign regulations, gave rise to lively debate on the likely consequences of the new institutional set-up governing Lower House elections. Relevant predictions by political scientists included the following:

- Personalistic appeals of candidates were no longer seen necessary as candidates could now freely campaign on the basis of party platforms in SMDs (Cowey/McCubbins 1995: 258; Thies 2002: 103).
- Niche strategies of candidates (focussing on individual local groups) would give way to more broad-based appeals (*ibid.*).
- Election campaigns would become more issue-oriented with the number of issues addressed in elections narrowing over time (Christensen 1996: 65-66).
- Party were seen likely to introduce new tactics to promote their platforms and candidates (Thies 2002: 105).

Moreover, as noted by Christensen (1998: 1004) and others, the new electoral system allowed for party-run media campaigns. Scholars had however little to say about how campaign changes would occur and what particular form they would take (Reed and Thies 2001b: 402-403). Some

were even sceptical that much change could be expected. Christensen (1996: 65-67, 1998: 989-992), for example, argued that the local and personal character of election races in SMDs would remain largely unchanged. As the number of votes needed to get elected in a local district had not changed much and as campaign regulation continued to be strict, incentives to build a personal following and a local vote-gathering machine persisted. Clearly, incentives emanating not only from the institutional specifics of the new electoral system but also from the largely untouched campaign regulations did not completely align. Against this background, some scholars suggested that pre-campaign campaigning *qua kōenkai* would continue and that raising money for such activities would remain important. In particular, in the face of the 'best-loser provision', double-listed candidates would continue their local campaign efforts and constituency service strategies (Reed 2002: 245, 248-9; Reed/Thies 2001b: 400-1). With these arguments in mind, we now turn to actual Lower House election campaign behaviour between 1996 and 2005.

## 5. Campaigning in 21st Century Japan: Changes in Context and Orientation

In the 1996 and 2000 elections, no fundamental shift to a different style of election campaigning could be observed. Proponents of the 'nothing-will-change-much' view of post-electoral reform campaigning in Japan could feel vindicated. Localised and personalised pre-campaign and campaign activities were largely continued (cf. Reed 2002: 248-250).<sup>7</sup> According to survey data from the Association for the Promotion of Clean Elections (Akarui senkyo suishin kyōkai 2006: 54), *kōenkai* membership, one major indicator in this respect, declined in the 1990s, though not on a massive scale (from 18.2% in 1990 to 14.3% in 2000). Party-centred national campaigns focussing on substantial issues covered in distinguishable party platforms or media-focussed existed at best in rudimentary form in 1996 and 2000 and were certainly not vigorously pursued by the parties themselves (cf. Christensen 1998: 992, 1003; Klein 2006a: 35, 2006b: 266). Television spots focussing on parties rather than individual candidates were for the first time allowed in the 1996 campaign but were mostly fairly conventional, if not outright dull in both 1996 and 2000 (Klein 2006: 40). While, in tune with new technological possibilities, parties and candidates made use of the Internet from the mid-1990s onwards, usage of the new medium was largely confined to disseminating general information. Notably, using the medium as a dynamic campaign tool was (and continues to be) constrained by the Public Offices Election Law which does not allow candidates and parties to create new web page contents and to send related emails during the official campaign

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7 See also Park (2000) and the case studies in Otake (1998) and Reed (2003b).

period (Blechinger 2003; Tkach-Kawaski 2003; *Nikkei Weekly*, 23 April 2007: 6). Finally, while the prevailing media-logic accentuated the personalisation of national campaigns in the 1990s (Reed 2002: 261), this trend fell short of a full-scale ‘presidentialisation’ of campaigns as witnessed in some West European countries. Kabashima and Imai (2002) showed that national leader evaluation effects in the 2000 Lower House election (which were largely negative in the case of then LDP leader Mori Yoshirō) were offset by candidate factors in the local electoral districts. By and large, campaign behaviour in the first two elections after electoral reform bore witness of a substantial degree of path-dependency. But then, drastic change could not be expected in the short term anyhow. Structural learning on the part of parties and candidates and corresponding changes in campaign tactics were also made difficult by parties, candidates and voters having first adjust to, on the one hand, changes in the composition of local election districts (made necessary by the introduction of the new electoral system) and, on the other hand, to the wave of party establishments, mergers and dissolutions which characterised the Japanese party system in the second half of the 1990s. Not only for voters, redistricting and turmoil in the party system caused a fair degree of confusion and consumed the attention and energy of parties and candidates (Christensen 1998: 992-1002; Reed 2003a for details).

Yet, election campaigning in Japan was ripe for major changes. After all, the environment in which present-day elections in Japan occur had changed in significant ways. Contextual change was not only restricted to the shift to a mixed-member majoritarian electoral system. Significant changes have also occurred in other respects. As for the media, in particular television has changed the way politics is ‘consumed’ by the Japanese public since the mid-1980s and increasingly so since early 1990s (Krauss and Nyblade 2005). While public broadcaster NHK continues to be seen as the most trustworthy source for information on political affairs, (soft) news programmes but also chat shows (*waido shō*) aired by commercial broadcasters have added political content in the 1990s. Such ‘infotainment’ programmes have become an interesting alternative communication platform for both party leaders and aspiring politicians.<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, the printed press has remained a major source of information, with every household having on average access to one newspaper (Klein 2006b: 55-57; Taniguchi 2007: 148-155). At the same time, Internet use has progressed steadily since the 1990s. About 52 percent of the Japanese population now use this medium.<sup>9</sup>

Also the electorate, i.e. the very target of campaigning, has undergone significant changes. First, population shifts and redistricting have transformed the electoral ‘landscape’: Out of

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8 On *waido shō*, see also the relevant entry in the Japanese version of the Wikipedia, <http://ja.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E3%83%AF%E3%82%A4%E3%83%89%E3%82%B7%E3%83%A7%E3%83%BC> (accessed 3 July 2007).

9 *Yomiuri Online*, 10 February 2007. Internet use though decreases with age: 91 percent of people in their 20s versus only 11 percent of people in their 70s use the medium (ibid.).

the 300 local districts for Lower House elections, these days only 100 are considered rural while an equal number is urban, the rest falling in between.<sup>10</sup> Second, turnout in national elections has gone down. While turnout in Lower House elections averaged 71 percent between 1960 and 1993, it stood at 60 percent in 1996 and 2003, 62.5 percent in 2000 and an unusually high 67.5 percent in 2005 (cf. Klein 2006b: 385-391). Third, the effectiveness of 'organised voting', i.e. votes mobilised by national support organisations of political parties (professional and other associations, trade unions, etc.) has significantly declined since the early 1980s (Köllner 2002). Fourth and perhaps most importantly, the percentage of so-called non-aligned or independent voters (i.e. voters not supporting a particular party) has risen steadily and is nearing the 50-percent mark (Tanaka/Martin 2003; Hashimoto 2004). In sum, not only the change in the electoral system on which many scholars have focussed, but also the rise of independent voters, the declining effectiveness of organised voting, the growing importance of urban and semi-urban constituencies and new media formats provide for vastly changed mediating conditions in which election campaigning takes place.

How to effectively adjust to these changes has constituted a big challenge for those in charge of running campaigns. In the midst of uncertainty, most Japanese politicians did at first not know how to rise to the challenges and to seize the related opportunities (Christensen 1998: 1004). Once however the party system had stabilised again and the immediate challenges of redistricting had been taken care of, the transition period provided a fertile ground for new ideas and approaches related to campaigning. An potentially far-reaching suggestion in this respect came from local politics: In January 2003, the then governor of Mie prefecture, Kitagawa Masayasu, called for the full-scale introduction of manifestos, i.e. pre-election declarations by political parties (and candidates running for public posts) what they will undertake if elected to power (Shūeisha 2007: 545).

In contrast to the fairly vague election platforms hitherto used by Japanese political parties, manifestos, as first used in Great Britain over 170 years ago, were supposed to be much more concrete, listing not only detailed post-elections goals but also relevant numerical goals, timelines, and sources of funding. Manifestos, it was forcefully argued, would effectively help political competition to become more party and issue-centred, i.e. help to reach the very aims of the 1994 political reform bills. Manifestos would make parties, especially governing ones, much more accountable and would assist voters in making informed choices (cf. Sasaki 2003; Lam 2005: 88-89). A number of civil society organisations, most visibly

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10 Based on census data regarding population density, Japan's Ministry of Internal Affairs determined in 2003 that a third each of the country's 300 local electoral districts were urban, rural, and 'in between' respectively. In purely dichotomous terms (more urban or more rural), 187 electoral districts — that is well over 60 percent of the total — were on the urban side in 2003. For a detailed breakdown of districts, see Yomiuri shinbun Tōkyō honsha seron chōsabu hensha (2004: 63-65).

the People's Council for Building a New Japan (Atarashii Nihon o tsukuru kokumin kaigi or Rinchō 21<sup>st</sup> Century for short), joined the chorus of those clamouring for the wide-spread adoption of such pre-election declarations.<sup>11</sup> In effect, a whole cottage industry evolved around the manifesto issue, with books praising the merits of manifestos and explaining their historical background (e.g. Ōyama/Fujimori 2004) and think tanks and other organisations providing regular evaluations of parties' manifestos (see e.g. *Asahi shinbun*, 13 May 2004: 4; PHP sōgō kenkyūjo 2005). Even an online search engine ([www.manifest.cc](http://www.manifest.cc)) was set up to assist in retrieving and comparing manifestos issued at the national and regional level. In 2003, 'manifesto' became the word of the year in Japan.

This 'manifesto boom' was made possible by the fact that Kitagawa's original plea for adopting the manifesto approach was eagerly taken up by a number of candidates running in the April 2003 unified local elections (Lam 2005: 89).<sup>12</sup> The manifesto movement reached the national level only a few months later when the Democratic Party (DPJ) became the first party to issue a manifest ahead of the upcoming election for the Lower House.<sup>13</sup> All other national parties promptly followed suit (*Shinbun daijesuto*, No. 468, 12/2003: 24). It was however the DPJ that gained most from using the new campaign tool.<sup>14</sup> With the help of its manifesto, the DPJ was able to boost its image as a credible challenger to the ruling LDP and, in consequence, did fairly well in the Lower House election of 2003 (cf. Kabashima et al. 2004: 23-27). More than half (52.6%) of the respondents taking part in a large-scale survey carried out in autumn 2003 by the Mizuho Research Institute believed that manifestos had been useful for deciding which party to support in the general election, only less than a sixth (13.4%) considered them not useful (Mizuho jōhō sōken 2003: executive summary).<sup>15</sup>

In 2004, national campaigning for the Upper House election, also revolved around manifestos in general and what they had to say in particular about pensions, the central issue of that election (*Asahi shinbun*, 13.5.2004: 4; *Daily Yomiuri Online*, 30.6.2004). Both the DPJ and many political analysts approached the following Lower House election, widely expected to take place in 2006 or 2007, with the assumption that campaigning would focus again on manifestos

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11 Rinchō 21<sup>st</sup> Century later even proposed to re-conceive elections for Japan's Upper House as mid-terms elections providing an opportunity for voters to judge governing parties on their achievements in implementing manifesto promises (Atarashii Nihon o tsukuru kokumin kaigi 2004). Rinchō 21<sup>st</sup> Century also set up an online chronology detailing the evolution of the manifest movement in Japan at [www.secj.jp/mani\\_chronology.htm](http://www.secj.jp/mani_chronology.htm) (last accessed 26 June 2007).

12 See for example the manifesto issued by former DPJ Lower House member Matsuzawa Shigefumi who successfully ran for governorship in Kanagawa prefecture: [http://matsuzawa.com/kanagawa/k\\_power/k\\_power.htm](http://matsuzawa.com/kanagawa/k_power/k_power.htm) (accessed 12 March 2007). The actual distribution of manifestos during the official campaign period of local elections became only allowed in early 2007 (cf. *Nihon keizai shinbun*, 22 February 2007: 2; *Nikkei Weekly*, 26 March: 6).

13 Within the governing LDP, the use of manifestos had already been proposed in 2002 in an internal reform paper. This suggestion had however not been taken up (cf. *Nihon keizai shinbun*, 15 October 2006: 2).

14 For a description of how the manifestos were compiled 2003 in various parties see Nishio and Iio (2004).

15 Interestingly more than 53 percent of the respondents had learned about the contents of the manifestos via television, another close to 30percent via newspapers. Only 2 percent of the respondents had actually personally received a manifesto.



tos. With the benefit of hindsight, we know that this particular election was however fought within totally different parameters. In fact, the Lower House election taking place in September 2005, provided a text-book example of a skilfully orchestrated media-focused election campaign. In terms of campaign communications, then prime minister Koizumi Jun'ichirō, who had used his right to call for a snap-election, managed to frame the election as a national referendum on one single issue: postal privatisation. Against the background of an intra-LDP rebellion against privatisation, Koizumi used the election to stylise it as an epic battle between the forces of reform and resistance within his own party. The prime minister used the short period between the dissolution of the Lower House and the start of the official campaign period to successfully put his stamp on the election.

Koizumi and his 'communications strategy team' (*komyunikeeshon senryaku chiimu*)<sup>16</sup> achieved this feat by feeding the media, and thus the public, with a series of candidate endorsement stories. News coverage initially focused solely on the 'parachuting' of attractive LDP candidates (dubbed *shikaku*, i.e. assassins by the media) into SMDs in which party rebels fought for re-election as independents or candidates of new parties. As challengers to these rebels, the LDP presented a number of political and other figures who already enjoyed or quickly developed celebrity status. This made for 'interesting' or even 'dramatic' news which diverted attention from the opposition and its positions. The opposition parties, having been wrong-footed in the first place by the timing of the election, never managed to mount a full-scale counter-offensive.<sup>17</sup> In particular the DPJ, which until the last fought in vein a manifesto-style campaign, had hardly a chance to get their messages through.<sup>18</sup>

As Maeda (2006) has shown, Koizumi's LDP owed its landslide win in the 2005 general election (made possible by the strong majoritarian component of the mixed-member electoral system) not so much to the focus on postal privatisation – which did not rank that high on voter's most-important-issues lists – but to the media spectacle of candidate nominations. The drama surrounding these endorsements enticed many eligible voters to cast their ballots for the LDP – voters who usually not bothered going to polling stations. This also explains the unusually high turnout in that election (see above). Especially women and young people in their 20s and 30s were susceptible to Koizumi's 'election theatre'. As economics professor and commentator Kaneko Masaru quipped after the election, 'the LDP attracted the kind of people who usually don't vote by fielding people who usually don't run' (cited in *Japan Times*, 9 October 2005: 19).

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16 The team was headed by Upper House member Sekō Hiroshige, a former section head in NTT's public affairs division. Preparations for the team dated back to the LDP's defeat in the Upper House election of 2004, after which a row of party reforms got initiated (*Tōkyō shinbun*, 3 October 2005: 1; *Mainichi shinbun*, 6 October 2005: 5). See also Sekō (2006: 96-99).

17 For analytic accounts of this 'drama-like election' (*gekijo senkyo*) see Taniguchi et al. (2005), Klein (2006a).

18 See the interview with the then DPJ party president Okada Katsuya, *Mainichi shinbun*, 25 October 2005, p 5. It did not help that the DPJ's central claim that 'there are other issues than postal privatisation' was not a particularly well-conceived one.

## 6. Explaining Recent Changes in Japanese Election Campaigning

At first view, the media-oriented campaign run by the LDP in 2005 and the preceding 'manifesto boom' seem to be quite different phenomena. We suggest however that they can both be understood as manifestations of voter chasing strategies. In the following we will try to explain why such voter chasing strategies have taken on prominence in present-day campaigning in Japan and why, on the other hand, more 'traditional' mobilising strategies can also still be observed.

We propose that it is possible to conceptualise eligible voters in Japan (and elsewhere) in terms of three concentric circles around the parties. The innermost circle consists of core supporters providing what is called in Japan the 'hard vote' (*koteihyō*, cf. Curtis 1971: 38-39). Such supporters can be reached and mobilised by *kōenkai* and other institutional linkages. The same does however not hold true with regard to the expanding intermediate circle of politically interested but unaffiliated voters (see above). Such voters, called *mutōhasō* in Japan, are especially numerous in urban areas, among younger people in their 20s to 40s, and among employees and women (Yomiuri shinbun Tokyo honsha seron chōsabu hensha 2004: 160-162). As the DPJ demonstrated with great success in the Lower House election of 2003 (and the Upper House election of 2004), one way to induce many such voters to vote for a given party consists of presenting an attractive manifesto. However, manifestos are not particularly effective when it comes to persuading the outermost circle of eligible voters, i.e. people who do not care much about politics (called *mukanshinzō* in Japan), to vote for a certain party and its candidates. As one senior LDP politician mentioned in an interview with the author, the greatest challenge for Japanese political parties these days consists of finding ways and means to bring both unaffiliated and politically uninterested voters into a party's fold.<sup>19</sup> In view of the continuing unravelling of corporate, family and community bonds which previously tied voters together ('psychological anarchy' in the words of the same LDP politician), non-traditional instruments and mechanisms have to be used for targeting voters who are not core supporters of a given party or candidate.

The most obvious means for getting in touch with such voters are audio-visual media. Television in particular puts party leaders into the spotlight. With regard to the Japanese case, Krauss (2002: 10, 12) has noted that

the personalization of the role [of the prime minister] is increasingly important to voters. [...] He (or she) will be much more central to party fortunes at the polls, but also the subject to increased scrutiny from media and voters – leading to greater accountability but not necessarily more political stability. Skillful and attractive prime ministers will gain popularity and better results for their party; unskillful and unattractive ones will find their terms quite short [...].

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<sup>19</sup> Personal interview with former LDP secretary general, Tokyo, October 2005.

Among recent LDP leaders, Koizumi Jun'ichirō demonstrated the greatest aptness at dealing with the media. He used television (and the Internet<sup>20</sup>) to portray himself as the champion of reform and his opponents within the LDP as 'resistance forces' (*teikō seiryoku*) stuck in the past. On numerous occasions, Koizumi made use of powerful imagery which got transmitted by the media. He frequently depicted politics as a colourful drama, managing to get even usually disinterested people involved (cf. Takase 2005: ch. 5; Taniguchi 2007: 155-156). The resounding success of the LDP in the 2005 general election demonstrated how a well-orchestrated media campaign (including weblogs aimed at Internet-affine voters) centring a simple message can be used with great effectiveness.

Still, national party-centred election campaigns of the manifesto or the media-spin type have not simply replaced localised and personalised election campaigns. In fact, voter targeting strategies in present-day Japan do not consist of just mobilising or chasing strategies. Rather we can observe a mix of the two, with mobilising strategies still being pursued at the local level and chasing strategies having taken on great importance at the national level. As noted above, mobilising strategies which characterised campaigning as a whole in the post-war decades are still pursued by candidates in SMDs (see also Krauss/Pekkanen 2004: 10-13). Many Japanese politicians continue to regard personal support organisations as indispensable tools and useful vote banks (particularly in times of low turnout). Still, membership in *kōenkai* has effectively declined significantly since 1990 when it stood at over 18 percent. Whether this reflects simply social changes (less demand for *kōenkai* membership, see also below) or a reduced reliance by politicians on personal support organisations is not known. According to a nationwide survey conducted in conjunction with the 2005 general election, only 10.7 percent of eligible voters at that time still belonged to *kōenkai* and only 1.9 percent were actually paying *kōenkai* membership dues (down from 3.8% in 1990) (Akarui senkyo suishin kyōkai 2006: 54). While the assumption that localised and personalised campaigning should become obsolete after the introduction of the new electoral system has not been borne out, the opposite thesis that things would largely continue as they were, is also not confirmed by the empirical evidence. While the large degree of continuity in terms of strict campaign regulations, the largely unchanged number of votes needed to get elected in SMDs plus the new 'best-loser provision' provide incentives to pursue mobilising strategies at the local level in Japan, the decline in *kōenkai* membership suggests that the effectiveness of such strategies has diminished. At least in part this trend can be explained by developments of a non-institutional kind including the unravelling of social and other ties, the parallel rise of independent voters and the continuing urbanisation of Japan's electoral geography.

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20 Starting in 2001, the Cabinet Public Relations Office began to email so-called 'lion heart' newsletters focussing on Koizumi's activities and thoughts. Until September 2006, when Koizumi left office, 249 such newsletters had been emailed to 1,6 million subscribers (*Japan Times*, 22 September 2006: 3).

At the national level, both the manifesto approach pursued in the 2003 election and the media-oriented LDP campaign in the 2005 election indicate that chasing strategies now figure prominently in Japan. The chasing strategies employed in Japan since the turn of the millennium come close to the ideal-type of such strategies: They are aimed at maximising the vote share and at attracting unaligned voters and they emphasise both modern campaign tools and party leaders. It remains to be seen however whether in the future – campaign regulations permitting – the Internet will be used as a dynamic campaign tool and whether individual parties might also emphasise organisational innovation as part of the campaign theme.

The new emphasis on chasing strategies at the national level squares to a substantial degree with the hypotheses advanced by Rohrschneider. Both the majoritarian bent of the mixed-member electoral system – propelling Japan slowly but steadily in the direction of a two-party system (cf. Reed 2005) – and the rise of independent voters induce Japanese parties to focus on chasing strategies at the national level (see also below). Whether Rohrschneider's third hypothesis – more centralised parties are more inclined to pursuing chasing strategies – can also be confirmed with respect to the Japanese case requires further study. At least it can be suggested that the party centralisation drive in the LDP under prime minister Koizumi<sup>21</sup> facilitated the orchestrated media campaign the party ran in the 2005 general election.

The new emphasis on chasing strategies at the national level also throws a positive light on some of the predictions and assumptions tabled in the wake of the introduction of Japan's new electoral system for the Lower House. First, it can be argued that the issue-orientation of election campaigns in Japan has increased not only with the advent of the manifesto approach but also with the emphasis on particular issues in recent elections (structural reform in 2003, postal privatisation in 2005, and pensions in both the 2004 and 2007 Upper House elections). Second, parties have indeed introduced new tactics to promote their platforms and candidates; witness the introduction of manifestos, the LDP's issue-framing in the 2005 campaign and the repeated use of direct appeals to voters by former prime minister Koizumi. Third, the assumption that the new electoral system allows for party-run media campaigns was forcefully underscored by the 2005 general election. The introduction of public party funding as part of the political reform bills of 1994 has increased the resources available to party headquarters to wage comprehensive media campaigns.<sup>22</sup>

To sum up, what we are observing in 21<sup>st</sup> century Japan is a 'hybridisation' of election campaigning. The dual character of present-day election campaigning rests on the continuing re-

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21 Cf. Köllner 2006: 253-254. Even before Koizumi, a trend towards more centralised candidate nominations was visible in the latter part of the 1990s (cf. Asano 2003).

22 According to Schafferer (2006: 26), the total amount of money spent on commercials by all Japanese parties at the national level doubled between 1996 and 2001 and reached 8 billion yen in the latter year. In 2004, the LDP alone spent 2.7 billion yen (€ 20 mill.) on PR including commercials (*Japan Times*, 9 October 2005: 19).

liance on tried and tested mobilisation activities at the local level and the increasing chasing orientation of election campaigns at the national level. We expect the latter to increase in intensity, with political parties further professionalizing their media communication strategies to get their messages across. As other parliamentary democracies such as Great Britain and Germany attest, this requires from parties a professionalisation of their communication apparatus, a strong orientation on individual issues, an adjustment of a policy content and personnel to the logic of the media, and a centralisation and personalisation of communications (Jun 2004). This does however not imply that the type of orchestrated campaign which the LDP ran in 2005 will become the norm in future campaigns or that such campaigns would always be successful.<sup>23</sup>

Post-electoral reform campaigning in Japan also supports some of the insights of the 'Americanisation' debate about election campaigning in mature democracies. As elsewhere, we can observe in Japan a heightened campaign focus on the party leader and the increased usage of non-traditional means (including chat shows) for making contact with the voter. The amount of money that Japanese parties invest in PR activities and more specifically commercials has substantially increased since the 1990s. Outside agencies are used by all major national parties to assist in structuring national election campaigns.<sup>24</sup> For the Lower House election campaign in 2005, for example, the LDP employed the services of PRAP Japan, Inc. while the DPJ had hired in 2004 the US PR firm Fleishman-Hillard to boost their image before the Upper House election that year. Still the fees paid to outside agencies to outside agencies pale in comparison to what is spent by parties in the US (*Japan Times*, 9 October 2005: 19, 31 October 2006: 3; Miura 2005: 129-132).<sup>25</sup>

This is not surprising as patterns of political communications continue to diverge between the US and Japan in the face of different mediating filters including party, media, regulatory and more broadly defined institutional contexts. Nevertheless, both the LDP and the DPJ entertain contacts with the US Republican and Democratic Party, respectively, and both the LDP and the DPJ have sent staff to the US to study campaign practices. Just as their counterparts in Western Europe, major Japanese parties are interested in finding out what can be usefully applied at home in terms of US campaign techniques. And just as their Western European counterparts, Japanese parties are selective about what they use in the end.<sup>26</sup> In

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23 Notably, various media representatives in Japan have expressed their regret about their being carried away by the drama choreographed by Koizumi and his allies in that election (cf. *Asahi shinbun*, 19 September 2006: 3). At least in parts of the media and the public there clearly was a desire to return to policy orientation in election campaigns.

24 For information on which agencies were used by the individual parties for the Upper House election campaign in 2004 see Miura (2005: 145).

25 According to the same sources the LDP paid less than 100 million yen (€ 744.000) to PRAP in 2005 while the DPJ paid 129 million yen (€ 942.000) to Fleishman-Hillard in 2004.

26 There also clear-cut regulatory limits to what can be applied. Continuing restrictions on Internet-based campaigning in Japan form a prime example in this regard. For a non-academic discussion of campaigning on the Internet in the US and Japan see Miura (2005: 189-205).

other words, the 'Americanisation' of Japanese election campaigning has to quite an extent been confined to 'shopping' activities by individual parties and does not reflect a whole-scale convergence of campaign orientation and practices. In the context of the newly prominent voter chasing strategies at the national level, campaigns have in effect become more party-centred in Japan and bear thus more resemblance today to the 'party-coated' Western European style of campaigning than the US one. The Japanese case also warns us against assuming that the evolution of electioneering follows a sort of linear logic according to which 'low tech' campaign methods are steadily replaced by more 'high tech' variants. Witness the 'discovery' of manifestos in Japan which elsewhere would be considered an 'old hat'. In sum, the Japanese case underlines the basic lesson that the 'Americanisation' of worldwide campaign practices is far from being a foregone conclusion.

## 7. Perspectives

We have argued in this paper that electioneering for the Japanese Lower House has undergone significant changes in recent years. Although the strong local and personalistic orientation which above all characterised elections campaigns until well into the 1990s, is still visible in the new single-member districts of the Lower House, personal support organisations of individual candidates have lost in importance as tools for vote mobilisation. On the other hand, party and issue centred electioneering has taken on new prominence since the 2003 general election. New voter targeting approaches employed at the national level in Japan, whether they are based on the manifesto approach or on concerted media campaigns centring on a simple message, can be categorised as chasing strategies. Such strategies, which also exist in other mature democracies, target in particular unaffiliated voters and emphasise party leaders. While individual Japanese parties are interested in how far US campaign practices can be usefully applied in the Japanese context, the notion of an 'Americanisation' of campaigning in Japan seems premature at best. Notably, electioneering for the Lower House has become more party-oriented in the course of introducing new voter chasing strategies. It remains to be seen though whether particular campaign instruments and tactics used in recent general elections can generate value-added in the longer term. Will, for example, the manifesto approach to campaigning develop in a sustainable manner and help to structure the vote over the long term? Or will the manifesto approach encounter diminishing returns because election platforms are increasingly reduced to largely unappealing 'laundry lists' of party pledges? In a nutshell, is the manifesto approach a harbinger of things to come or just a fleeting fad?

With regard to the causes of campaigning changes in Japan, it seems clear that the new emphasis on voter chasing strategies has been fostered by the strong majoritarian component of

the Lower House's mixed-member electoral system. Yet, it remains unclear just how much of the change can actually be traced back to a rational adjustment of party actors to the new electoral system. After all, other environmental changes, in particular the rise of independent voters, have also provided strong incentives to pursue voter-chasing strategies. For the time being, all we can suggest is that electoral system change in conjunction with other pertinent contextual changes provide for a setting that encourages party-centred campaigning on a scale that did not exist until the early 1990s. On the other hand, both path dependence and functional arguments help to explain why voter chasing strategies do not fully replace but simply complement more traditional vote mobilising strategies still pursued at the local level in Lower House election campaigns. In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, both chasing and mobilising strategies form part of the campaigning tool kit employed by Japanese parties and politicians for targeting voters.

In the past, the literature on Japanese politics has produced a significant number of insightful studies on electioneering. It is however also true that we are only at the beginning with respect to understanding and explaining campaign communications in 21<sup>st</sup> century Japan. A few non-academic books either seek to show how Japanese voters are brainwashed by media-focused campaigns (Miura 2005) or boil down to self-congratulatory treatments of how the author masterminded the successful campaign of the LDP in 2005 (Sekō 2006). What is sorely lacking are in-depth analyses of the design and running of election campaigns in present-day Japan. We do, for example, not know to what extent the recent shift to chasing strategies at the national level reflects political actors' structural learning in the face of institutional and non-institutional environmental change and/or the diffusion of international campaign models and norms and what was purely coincidental (or just occurred in parallel with these environmental changes). In order to understand just how important institutional variables are in terms of explaining changed campaign behaviour, it might be useful to compare recent campaigning strategies for the Lower House with those for the Upper House with its different electoral system.

We also do not know much about how and why campaign styles and communications strategies of individual parties differ. Have, for example, the Japanese Communist Party or New Kōmeitō drawn the same lessons in terms of changed campaign orientations and tactics as the LDP or the DPJ? To what extent has a 'professionalisation' or 'modernisation' of campaigning occurred in the various parties since the 1990s? How does the use of the Internet and other new technologies in (pre-)election campaigning in Japan compare to that in other mature democracies? More in-depth and in particular comparative research is needed to answer these questions. Electioneering, hitherto a goldmine for research on Japanese politics, awaits new diggers.

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