

# Japanese electioneering tiptoes into Internet age

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A man watches a video of Taro Aso, Japanese Prime Minister and leader of ruling Liberal Democratic Party campaigning

High-tech Japan is gearing up for elections, but you won't hear a tweet from Prime Minister Taro Aso or his main rivals.

US President Barack Obama's use of the Web helped catapult him into the White House but lawmakers in [Japan](#) have been slower to embrace the Internet, leaving many young voters feeling disconnected with the political process.

When election campaigning officially begins on August 18, a cyberspace ban will make it illegal for politicians to update their Internet blogs,

share their political views by email or put new videos online.

Not that you would usually find more than a handful of Japanese politicians on Twitter, the popular micro-blogging service that began in the United States. Obama's White House may "[tweet](#)" but Aso certainly does not.

It is an odd situation in one of the world's most wired countries, where more than 60 percent of the population regularly uses the Internet.

Japanese politicians "are missing a real chance to try to generate interest among young voters by not allowing cyber campaigning," said Professor Jeff Kingston, director of Asian Studies at Temple University in Tokyo.

"In the last (presidential) campaign in the United States, the Internet was a great tool for energising young voters, but in the last election here only about one third of young voters actually exercised their vote."

Japan may be a high-tech paradise, but electioneering here is still largely done the old-fashioned way, with leaflets and shoe leather, bowing by candidates on the streets and roving sound vans repeating their names.

Campaigning is slowly crawling into the digital age, however.

The two main parties both have meticulously designed websites and have begun putting some videos online on YouTube and other sites, although most just show shaky recordings of party press conferences or politicians' speeches.

One video, however, has proven a hit: a cartoon posted by the LDP portraying opposition chief Yukio Hatoyama as a suitor making unrealistic promises to a dinner date has been viewed more than 400,000 times on YouTube.

"Why don't you switch to me?" the Hatoyama lookalike asks a woman, promising lower taxes and more state aid. When she asks how he will foot the bill, he replies: "I'll think about the details after we get married."

Japan's largest Internet retailer Rakuten Inc. meanwhile has launched the nation's first service that allows supporters to make political donations online, while other websites are attempting to encourage debate between voters.

But Japan remains far behind many other countries, largely because of the Internet ban that stems from a law drafted in 1950 restricting the distribution of campaign material to certain places such as rallies.

The opposition Democratic Party of Japan (DPJ) says it would overhaul the law if it wins the August 30 election, as polls suggest is likely.

It blames the conservative Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), which has ruled Japan for almost all of the past half century, for blocking changes up to now.

"The reason why the ban exists is that most Internet users are supporters of the DPJ. It's a way for the LDP to keep young, tech-savvy voters in the dark about policies," said Kan Suzuki, an opposition lawmaker in the upper house.

Traditional Japanese media tend to focus on showdowns between parties rather than nitty-gritty politics, said Suzuki, who was the first Japanese member of parliament to open an office in the virtual world of Second Life in 2007.

"Voters are fed up with news about fighting between the LDP and the DPJ. They want to know about the more important policy issues. So in that sense, I think that the Internet has a vital role to play," he told AFP.

Many young Japanese say they do care about politics but find it hard to get excited about the two main parties, led by sexagenarians in grey suits -- Aso is 68 while DPJ chief Hatoyama is 62.

"The parties just argue with each other like children. It's stupid," said Hiroko Hayashi, a 26-year-old office worker hanging out in Tokyo's hip shopping district of Shibuya.

"We need a charismatic leader. At first I thought Aso had charisma but he doesn't," she added.

"American leaders are good at speaking to the public," added her friend, Sayaka Kobayashi, 23. "Japanese [politicians](#) aren't convincing."

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