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*This book is dedicated to the memory of Timothy Cook.*

## *Chapter Two*

# **Australia: Potential Unfulfilled? The 2004 Election Online**

**Rachel Gibson and Ian McAllister**

When democratic governments started to adopt new information and communication technologies (ICTs), there were early signs that Australia was becoming a world leader (Dunleavy *et al*, 2003). There was a flurry of activity in the mid to late 1990s, with the Australian Labor Party (ALP) claiming a world first in party website production in 1994 (Gibson and Ward, 2002), the Australian Senate becoming the first legislative body to officially recognise online petitions (Magarey, 1999), and the launch of pioneering e-government and e-democracy agendas at the national and state level (Clift, 2002). But progress has slowed in recent years. Politicians and government officials have become more concerned with the symbolic value of wiring up government, and sought efficiency gains rather than new ways to promote citizen participation and genuine structural modernisation (Bishop and Anderson, 2004; Fiew and Young, 2004).

Certainly if one considers elections and campaigning in Australia there are signs of a lull in the use of new ICTs since the early years of the new century. After an initial rush by parties to set up their virtual 'shop fronts' in time for the 1998 federal election, studies of state and national organisations (Gibson and Ward, 2002, 2003; Chen, 2001) and their elected representatives in parliament (Chen, 2002a, 2002b) in the lead-up to the 2001 election have consistently shown a lack of innovation and enthusiasm. Parties' websites have focused on

providing information in a largely static format with limited avenues for genuine interactivity or mobilisation of volunteers, support and donations. Furthermore, although the parliamentary parties and many fringe parties had established national websites by the end of the 1990s, candidates were much slower to follow, with only a minority from any party establishing an independent web presence by 2001 (Gibson and McAllister, 2006).

This chapter asks whether the Federal Election of 2004 saw any significant shift among Australian parties and candidates in their uptake of Internet campaigning. Elections serve as catalysts for the development of new campaign practices in their own right, and the wider social and political context surrounding the 2004 election suggested an environment more conducive to campaigning than had previously been the case. By 2004, the ALP had been out of power for the best part of a decade and was primed to exploit all means to reach out to voters and re-establish itself as a viable governing party. From a technological perspective, levels of Internet and broadband access had risen significantly in Australia since the 2001 election providing voters with faster and cheaper access to the more innovative aspects of the online campaign such as flash graphics and animated video clips.<sup>1</sup> Finally, at the global level, the Howard Dean revolution in Internet campaigning had come and gone only a few months earlier in the United States, a phenomenon that could not fail to attract attention of campaign strategists around the world.

In order to examine whether the 2004 Federal Election heralded the 'arrival' of the Internet as a significant campaign tool in Australia, the chapter is divided into five sections. First, we present an overview of the Australian electoral context and political system more generally, as well as some political background to the 2004 election. In the second section, we examine the evolution of Internet campaigning and the role that the new ICTs have played in both elections and the articulation of voter interests more generally. The third section focuses on the 2004 election specifically, presenting evidence on the overall presence of parties and candidates online and the messages that were sent out over the web. The fourth section examines the audience for these sites, what other sites they visited online, and what effect—if any—their exposure to these sites may have had on their electoral behaviour. Finally, the concluding section draws together the findings to assess whether or not 2004 represented a progression for the Australian parties into the era of e-campaigning.

## The Campaign Environment

The Australian political system that was established in 1901 was modeled on the Westminster Parliament, departing from this mainly by using a federal system and a directly elected upper house, the Senate. The lower House of Representatives initially consisted of seventy-five members elected from all states and territories for a three-year term (now expanded to 150 members). The Senate ini-

tially consisted of thirty-six members (now seventy-five) elected for a six-year term and was intended to protect the smaller states from the numerical dominance of the larger states in the House of Representatives. In the 1880s and 1890s, the salient political division was an urban-rural cleavage, with the rural areas opposing the economic policies of the rapidly industrializing cities. This regional conflict was gradually overtaken in the early years of federation by conflicts between industrial owners and workers, although rural interests have remained politically important.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, three parties dominated federal politics: the Labor Party, which was formed in 1901 from the various colonial Labor parties, and the Protectionists and Free Traders (Loveday, 1977; McMullin, 1995). In 1909, the Protectionists and the Free Traders settled their differences and combined to form the Liberal Party (later the United Australia Party, and later again re-adopting the Liberal Party title), thereby establishing the pattern of two-party competition that has been the basis of the Australian party system ever since. Despite the dominance of the owner-worker cleavage, reflected in Labor-Liberal party competition, the urban-rural division has remained politically salient through the Country (later National) Party. Since the 1920s, the National and Liberal parties have been in permanent coalition, except for two short periods in 1973-1974 and 1987.

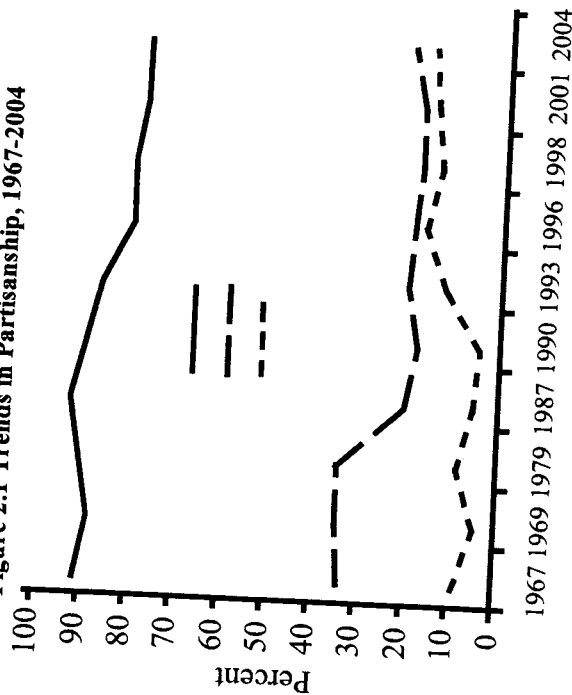
More than any other established democracy, Australia has experimented with a variety of electoral systems, at both state and federal level, and also between upper and lower houses (Farrell and McAllister, 2005; Sawyer, 2001).<sup>2</sup> At the national level, lower house elections have been based on the alternative vote since 1918, and for upper house elections, on the single transferable vote since 1949. But perhaps the most distinctive aspect of the electoral system is compulsory voting, so that not only are voters required by law to register to vote, they are also forced to attend at the polling place (though not necessarily to vote). This system was introduced in Commonwealth elections in 1924, and by 1941 had been extended to all of the states and territories. Although it is an offence not to vote without a valid reason, there is strong public support for the system, and relatively few non-voters are ever fined (Mackerras and McAllister, 1999). One significant consequence of compulsory voting is that during election campaigns, parties focus their activities on conversion rather than on mobilisation, since the latter is institutionally enforced.

Historically, compulsory voting is credited with maintaining the strong two-party system, itself predicated on high levels of partisanship among voters. Since voters are compelled to vote about once every eighteen months (at either a state or a federal election), it is hardly surprising that partisanship is relatively strong. However, over the past decade or so, minor parties have begun to make some modest inroads into the two-party system, while at the same time the strength of partisanship, if not the direction, has weakened. During the 1980s and 1990s, the main minor party was the Australian Democrats; although formed by a disaffected Liberal in 1977, it has largely attracted its support from ex-Labor voters and activists (Warhurst, 1997). In the late 1990s, Pauline Han-

son's One Nation Party attracted considerable support, peaking at almost one quarter of the vote in the Queensland state election in June 1998, on a populist platform that combined opposition to Asian migrants and aborigines with support for gun ownership (Gibson *et al.*, 2002). In the 2004 election the Greens became the largest minor party, with 7.8 percent of the first preference vote.

The declining support for parties is illustrated in Figure 2.1, which shows patterns of partisanship from 1967 until 2004 based on national surveys. The proportion of major party identifiers has declined from a high of 91 percent in 1987, to 77 percent in 2004, representing a decline of just under 1 percent at each election. At the same time, the number of those who consider themselves very strong partisans has declined by almost half, though almost all of the decline occurred between 1979 and 1987. At the same time, those who have no partisanship have increased from 8 percent in 1967, to 16 percent in the 2004 election. These trends are similar to, though not as dramatic as, those found in most of the other advanced democracies (Dalton *et al.*, 2002).

Figure 2.1 Trends in Partisanship, 1967-2004

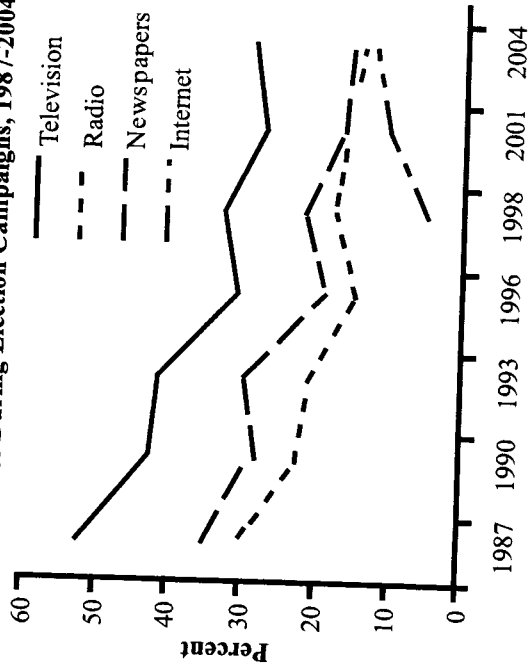


Sources: 1967-1979 Australian National Political Attitudes surveys and 1987-2004 Australian Election Study.

As party attachments have declined, this has also had consequences for the character of election campaigns. One trend has been an increasing proportion of voters who delay their decision until the campaign has commenced and, in the case of about one in ten voters, even until polling day itself (McAllister, 2002). In 1987, 27 percent of voters said that they decided on their vote during the campaign; in 1998 the same figure was 42 percent, although it declined to 32

percent in 2004. At the same time, the proportion of voters who say that they were interested in the election campaign, or who cared about who won, has also declined. For example, in 1993, 49 percent said that they had 'a good deal of interest' in the election; the same figure in 2004 was 30 percent. One indicator of this declining interest is numbers watching the leaders' debates. Televised debates began in 1984 and have been held regularly since 1990, when 56 percent of voters watched the debate; in 2004, just 35 percent said that they watched the debate.

Figure 2.2 Media Use During Election Campaigns, 1987-2004



Sources: 1967-1979 Australian National Political Attitudes surveys and 1987-2004 Australian Election Study.

In line with declining interest in elections, those using the various media sources to follow the election campaign have declined consistently (Figure 2.2). In 1987 just over half of the electorate said that they regularly followed the election on television, but by 2004 the figure was just 28 percent, a major decline in a relatively short period of time. The use of newspapers and radio for election news has declined at a similar rate, albeit from a lower base. The only medium that is increasingly used for election information is the Internet; when the question was first asked in 1998, 4 percent of voters said that they had used it at least once for that purpose. By 2004, that had increased threefold, a substantial increase in just a six-year period.

Since 1932, the government and opposition parties receive free airtime on the government-funded free-to-air Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) on television and radio.<sup>3</sup> This consists of one hour of free airtime, composed of

thirty minutes for the party's policy launch, and six slots of five minutes each to cover particular policies. There is no free airtime available on the free-to-air or pay-for-view commercial channels (Chaples, 1994). While parties must disclose donations of more than \$1,500 (and individual candidates donations of more than \$200), there is no cap on what can be donated, nor on what can be spent on political advertising during election campaigns. Since 1984, the parties have also received state funding, based on the votes won at the previous election. The amount is adjusted for inflation and a party must receive 4 percent of the vote in order to qualify. There are no restrictions on how state funds can be spent.

In the 2001 election, the two major parties together received \$29.4m in state funding. However, their combined total income was \$113.5m, the additional funds being made up of private and corporate donations (AES, 2005). Yet, the parties are estimated to have spent more than their total state funding on paid political advertising alone. Estimates vary (since there is no disclosure requirement), but it seems that together they spent some \$30m on media advertising, with the 2004 estimate being around \$40m (Miskin and Grant, 2004). In line with the rules governing the traditional media, there are no restrictions on online political advertising, other than the general regulations that affect the online sector as a whole.

## The Development of Internet Campaigning

The history of Internet use by parties in Australia, as in most countries, dates from the mid-1990s and the rise of the World Wide Web (WWW). Some initial uses had been made of computing and digital technologies prior to this. During the late 1980s the ALP developed *Electrac*—its electronic voter database compiled by constituency office staff and accessed by candidates to target swing voters. The Liberals' version—*Feedback*—emerged a few years later, becoming fully operational in 1996 (Van Onselen and Errington, 2004). These systems appear to have been essentially 'stand-alone' devices, located in an individual MP's or candidate's office, rather than operated as a networked and remotely accessible resource.

Starting with websites as a benchmark for parties' harnessing of Internet technologies, the ALP led the field, setting up a site in 1994. Most other parties soon followed suit, with the pace quickening in the lead-up to the 1998 election (Gibson and Ward, 2002). Although the parties saw the merits of being online, (or at least the potential for criticism in not having a web presence), individual candidates were less convinced about the need for a virtual identity. Using sites from 2001 that carried a listing of candidate pages, estimates run as low as twelve candidates online, a tiny proportion of the 1,324 candidates that officially stood for election.<sup>4</sup> Evidence supplied by the candidates themselves in the 2001 Australian Candidates Study (ACS), provides a healthier picture of online activ-

ity, however, with 37 percent of those responding to the survey reporting that they had maintained an independent personal campaign site.<sup>5</sup>

In terms of what the parties were actually doing with their sites, a study of the content of the national sites and the responses of party communication officials to surveys in 2000 indicated an information-centric approach with limited participatory initiatives, e.g. feedback forms, chatrooms, etc. (Gibson and Ward, 2002). Within these broad trends some interesting variation was observed. The One Nation Party proved to be among the most interactive of the parties, offering numerous channels for supporters to send their views to the leaders as well as a bulletin board for multi-way exchanges. While most parties did not take advantage of the resource mobilization potential of the web, the ALP and Greens bucked the trend, offering direct donation and membership sign-up facilities via their sites.

During the 2001 election there were few signs that the parties had recognized the power of the medium as a tool to convert voters. Most sites followed a formulaic pattern, migrating offline content to the online environment, offering media releases, policy statements and leader biographies along with a smattering of negative campaigning and a single organizational contact email address. The two major parties did provide sign-up facilities for e-bulletins but other than this made few efforts to exploit the immediacy and interactivity of the Internet. One notable exception was the ALP's political 'Big Brother' site, in which the audience was invited to vote out members of the government's front bench on a weekly basis. At the state level, efforts at web campaigning during 2001 proved even more patchy, with a study revealing that not all branches of the two major parties actually had active sites and among those that had, content was thin (Gibson and Ward, 2003). The Greens emerged as the best performer, showing a notably higher degree of interactivity and participatory initiatives, despite their minor party status.

Research conducted since 2001 has confirmed the perception of a minimalist Internet approach by parties, with their online materials being viewed as 'brochure-like' repositories for party documents and press releases and comparing poorly to the efforts made by pressure groups and protest networks (Edwards, 2005). From an internal perspective, while voter databases continued to be developed and enhanced by the major parties (particularly the Liberals), their maintenance and access appeared to remain the prerogative of local party offices. They were often used to support conventional forms of campaigning such as personal canvassing or direct mail, rather than online viral approaches using email (Van Onselen and Errington, 2004). A reluctance to engage in more active forms of online targeting was no doubt driven as much by the parties' concerns about annoying voters with unwanted spam as by any inherent fear of the new technology.

Beyond the organizational level, a study of the parties' elected representatives has shown high levels of personal usage of new ICTs in terms of web browsing and email. Survey data gathered in early 2002 reveal that just under 40 percent of all federal parliamentarians were browsing the web more than once a

day and over 70 percent were using email with a similar level of frequency (Chen, 2002a). In terms of using it in their interactions with citizens, most saw new ICTs as a secondary channel for voter communication. Chen reports that less than half of state and federal parliamentarians had instituted a mechanism to log their email correspondence, a process that is long-established practice with offline constituent mail. There are, of course, exceptions to this general rule, a good example of the 'wired' politician being Victor Perton, the Victorian state Liberal MP who was an early adopter of the technology, setting up one of the first personal MP websites and using it as a discussion forum for registered users. A less positive example is the Victorian Liberal premier Jeff Kennett's ill-fated bid to retain his premiership in 1999. Lamponed for making his campaign more about personality and style than substance, his personal website *Jeff.com* became the focal point for this criticism, even spawning a series of spoof sites, the most famous of which, *jeffed.com*, was run by one of his former staff.

A range of other political organizations and groups have cultivated an active online presence. Particularly notable are the online discussion sites such as *Online Opinion*, *Political Lobby* and *Australian Politics*, which have proved to be lively spaces for a small but active number of voters to engage in meaningful debate (Chen, 2005). The 'insider' gossip site *crikey.com* enjoys a higher public profile, providing an alternative online news service constructed in part through anonymous tips collected via its website. Unions and community groups such as *Labor.net* and *Democracy Watch* also utilize the new media, presenting well-designed professional sites. In general, however, along with social advocacy groups, they have tended to adopt the 'flat' approach to content favored by the parties, with interactivity being limited largely to users downloading pdf documents or searching the site. More active sites include the aptly named *Activist Rights*, *Active*, and *community activist technology*, all of which view the Internet as a mobilizing tool in its own right, offering server space and lessons to those wanting to establish a websites, as well as direct downloading of software designed to help establish community groups online.<sup>6</sup>

## The 2004 Federal Election

Given the relatively low profile the parties had adopted on the Internet leading up to the 2004 federal election, it was surprising to learn in July, only a few months before polling day, that the parties considered that the Internet would prove to be a 'significant' part of their campaigns. Observers in the media were clearly sceptical of such claims. Margot Kingston, a prominent commentator, journalist and blogger for the *Sydney Morning Herald* pointedly asking the readers of her web diary, "Have you ever seen anything from either major party trying to reach people through the Internet?"<sup>7</sup>

Such criticism notwithstanding, the environment for Internet campaigning had certainly improved since 2001, not least in terms of the growth in the poten-

tial audience. According to official government figures from August 2001, the proportion of those saying they had accessed the Internet in the week before the survey was 37 percent (Lloyd and Bill, 2001). The Australian Election Survey (AES) estimates of the electorate's access put the figure rather higher at 59 percent in November 2001.<sup>8</sup> By 2004 access had risen to 66 percent of the electorate, close to the figure of 63 percent produced by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in that year.<sup>9</sup> The numbers looking for election information, however, were much lower, and certainly not comparable to the majority of Internet users doing so in the U.S. presidential elections of the same year (Rainie *et al*, 2005). The AES data reveal that around 18 percent of Internet users were accessing election-related information online, with no more than around 5 percent viewing the parties and candidates' pages.

## Research Questions, Data and Methodology

In this section we examine the 2004 online election in three particular respects:

- The extent to which the parties used new ICTs for campaign purposes at both the national and local level;
- The uses made by parties and candidates of the technology and, in particular, whether there were any new and innovative experimental applications trialled; and
- To what extent voters paid attention to the online campaign and whether it influenced their vote.

To address these questions, we present a range of data drawn from surveys and content analysis of party websites. We also utilise the Australian Candidate and Election Studies to profile individual use of the web and email. More specifically:

- To examine the extent of parties' use of the technology we provide a series of estimates of the use of the web by both national organisations and individual candidates, comparing the figures across parties and to those for 2001.
- The use that parties made of the Internet is examined through existing accounts of the content of national party sites as well more in-depth coding and analysis (conducted by the authors) of all candidate sites.
- The response of voters to the online campaign is characterised using AES data. In particular, we look at how interested they were overall in the online election and which sites were the most likely to be visited. We then examine the social background and political preferences of those visiting election related sites and ask how far they are likely to have been affected by what they saw.

## Presence

A total of 1,421 candidates were nominated for the 2004 Federal Election, 330 for the Senate and 1,091 for the House of Representatives.<sup>10</sup> Of these, only a minority established a campaign website, although estimates of the actual number of candidates online varied. Table 2.1 provides an overview of the estimates from three major sources. The figures exhibit a considerable amount of variance, with the Australian Candidates Survey (ACS) figures revealing a much healthier picture of candidates' online presence than the other studies. The ACS puts the total proportion of candidates running sites at one third, while Ward *et al* (2004) estimate just over one in ten.<sup>11</sup> Chen (2005) does not produce an overall estimate across the parties but reports figures for individual parties by house; estimates for lower house candidates range from as low as zero for the Democrats to almost one in two of Liberals. Methodological differences in the studies' approach to data collection may explain much of this variation.<sup>12</sup> Despite these differences, however, all of the studies point to a stronger presence by the major parties compared to minor parties. Ward *et al* (2004) report the Nationals to be the most wired party, with 42 percent of its candidates online, the Liberals and Labor follow in second and third places, respectively. Similar rankings are found by Chen (2005) and also the ACS. One clear point of difference is the very high number of Green candidates online according to ACS estimates (see endnote 12).

## Content Analysis

Most observers were largely unimpressed by the online efforts of the parties, particularly by the established parties. Reviewing the press's reaction to the parties' efforts, Miskin (2005) noted that two minor parties, the Greens and the Democrats, had the most innovative online campaigns. The Greens offered a campaign blog as well as daily opinion polls that allowed users to generate their own report of the cumulative responses. In a break with convention they also set up a separate website, *democracy4sale.org*, which gave users the opportunity to find out for themselves who was filling the parties' coffers and by how much. The Democrats provided a flash movie, 'The Lie Detectors', to visitors entering the home page that could be emailed directly to others. The party also offered a highly tailored and personalized e-news service, with policy-specific options for voters to check when signing up to receive their updates. In addition, the leader, Andrew Bartlett, established a blog (the only parliamentary party leader to do so) that was regularly updated and appeared to be produced at his own keyboard rather than written by his staff.

The major parties, on the other hand, were seen as offering 'standard campaign brochures' (Jackman, 2004, p.6; Sinclair, 2004, p.10), and making very limited use of more specific e-campaign items. The Liberal Party offered some software downloads (backgrounds, screensavers, etc.) and their coalition partner

the Nationals provided an interactive home loan calculator where voters could estimate how much higher their mortgage payments would be under a Labor government. Labor, for their part, offered a sign-up to RSS news feeds. Perhaps the most innovative use of the new technology by the major parties during the election came from a group of senior Liberal ministers who, on their own initiative, engaged Internet marketing companies to run a targeted email campaign directed at voters in their constituencies (Secombe, 2004).

A more in-depth study of site contents by Chen (2005, 2006) confirmed this picture of the smaller parties displaying more activity, although he took a less critical line toward the major parties' efforts, arguing that they ran 'sophisticated, attractive and relatively information-rich websites' (Chen, 2006, p.118). Interactive initiatives such as e-bulletin sign-up facilities, searchable candidate listings, online secure donation and joining facilities featured in most sites. While perhaps basic by U.S. standards, the consistency of the appearance of these sites did represent an improvement on 2001. Video and audio clips were also omnipresent, although most of these were embedded in the site rather than being made available for forwarding (the exception here being the Democrats' 'Lie Detector' video noted above). The adage of having too much of a good thing could be applied to the Nationals, however, who had the least user-friendly multi-media options—a campaign video taking up a huge twenty-two megabytes of bandwidth or almost half of the average monthly amount downloaded by individual subscribers (Chen, 2005, p.4).

The results of the more detailed analysis by Ward *et al* (2004) of the 110 individual candidate sites discovered in their search of the web are reported in Table 2.2. In terms of content, the main ingredients proved to be a biography and a contact email address, along with some pictures or images. Most candidates reported their stance on the main election issues along with news, both local and national. Below this baseline, however, the figures drop, both for traditional campaign activities and for more specific online activities. Concerning the former, facilities to sign up as a volunteer were offered on only one third of sites and donation and membership opportunities were even scarcer, with only one in six candidates providing this option. Surprisingly, speeches were also a relatively rare feature and online surveys were available in a minority of sites (15 percent) as were discussion boards and blogs (8 percent), sending links (5 percent) and material to distribute (4 percent).

In addition to these more standard features, Ward *et al* also examined sites for negative campaigning that they found to be a rarity; only 5 percent of candidates engaged in personal attacks of any kind toward their rivals. The use of satire and humor, while a growing phenomenon in online elections (Cornfield *et al*, 2003; Coleman and Hall, 2001), also proved rare among Australian candidates, with only 3 percent including some kind of humorous element on their websites. Overall, therefore, campaign websites were more akin to what has been described as cyber-brochures than with the heralded interactive online campaign.

### Non-Party Players

Away from the parties, the election also saw a number of parody sites emerge, offering a lively diversion. Anti-Howard sites proved particularly prolific and popular, so much so that by the first week in September, a month before the election, some were registering a higher level of traffic than the Liberal Party's home page.<sup>13</sup> Mark Latham, the Labor leader, was also lampooned, with the delicately titled *marklathamsucks.com* providing some counter-balance to the attention lavished on the Prime Minister. In addition to the wide array of anti-party/anti-candidate sites, election-oriented material appeared from more established advocacy groups as well independent and mainstream media organizations and a growing number of bloggers. Many of these sites proved to be far more inventive than the parties in their adoption of viral techniques, promotion of genuine debate, and the use of multi-media formats to present their material (Chen, 2005; 2006).

Table 2.1 Candidates' Web Presence in the 2004 Federal Election

Party	Estimate (percent)				Ward & Lusoli
	Chamber	Chen	ACS		
Australian Labor Party	Senate	20	-	-	-
	House	30	-	-	23
	<i>Total</i>	-	42	-	-
Liberal Party	Senate	16	-	-	-
	House	44	-	-	28
	<i>Total</i>	-	43	-	-
Nationals	Senate	0	-	-	-
	House	33	-	-	42
	<i>Total</i>	-	64	-	-
Australian Democrats	Senate	17	-	-	-
	House	0	-	-	-
	<i>Total</i>	-	24	-	-
Australian Greens	Senate	0	-	-	-
	House	8	-	-	5
	<i>Total</i>	-	50	-	-
Other	Senate	-	-	-	-
	House	-	-	-	1
	<i>Total</i>	-	8	-	-
<b>Total</b>		- <sup>a</sup>	32 <sup>b</sup>		16 <sup>c</sup>

#### Notes

<sup>a</sup> No overall total provided.

<sup>b</sup> Figures based on self-reports from ALP, Liberal, National, Green, Democrat, One Nation, Family First, Citizens Electoral Coalition. Restricting figures to the first six parties (with parliamentary representation), the proportion online rises to 39 percent.

<sup>c</sup> Figures based on detection of an active campaign URL in House of Representatives' elections only.

Sources: 2005 Australian Candidate Study; Chen (2005); Ward, S. J., Lusoli, W. and R. K. Gibson. (2004). Unpublished data from ESRC E-Society Programme Award 'Parliamentary Representation in the Internet Age'. Award no. RES-335-25-0029.



Table 2.2 Features of Candidates' Websites

Campaign activity	Feature	%	Count
<i>Baseline</i>	Contact details	95	105
	Biography	92	101
	Images	97	107
<i>Linkage</i>	Link to national party	65	72
	Link to local party	38	42
<i>Campaign information</i>	Links to other candidates	15	16
	Issue positions / pledges	71	78
	Local news	64	70
	National news	63	69
<i>Traditional campaigning</i>	Voting information	43	47
	E-news on demand	15	17
	Volunteer	35	39
<i>Online campaigning</i>	Donate	17	19
	Join	15	16
	Speeches	13	14
<i>Online campaigning</i>	Diary / list of events	11	12
	Surveys / polls	15	17
	Discussion board	8	9
	Audio-video files	7	8
	Download material to distribute	4	4
	Send links from site	5	5
	Display software	2	2

Note: Percentages refer to proportion of total sites containing this feature. Counts are raw number of sites with the feature present. N = 110.

## Internet Campaigning and the Electorate

While perhaps not breaking the mould, therefore, the parties were clearly making some strides to promote themselves and their programs online during the 2004 election, with the minor parliamentary parties proving the most adept. We turn now to the demand side of the campaign and the level of interest among the voters. We pose three basic questions: How many voters actually paid attention to the online campaign? Who were they? And most importantly, what effect did it have on their vote? The first question is easily addressed: since 1998, the AES has asked respondents if they followed the election on the Internet. Table 2.3 shows that following the election on the Internet has increased significantly, with the increase being broadly in line with increased Internet penetration across the population. In 1998, just 28 percent of voters had Internet access, and 5 percent of voters reported accessing election information at least once. By 2001, 59 percent were connected to the Internet, and 9 percent reported using it for election information. The 2005 election was the first election in which Internet use

passed one in ten of all voters, in this case 12 percent. As we saw earlier in Table 2.2, the proportion accessing political information on the Internet in 2004 was almost on a par with those following the election on the radio.

Addressing the second and third questions (who these Internet voters are, and whether their exposure to election information on the Internet has affected their vote), is best examined in the form of two multivariate analyses. The first model predicts use of the Internet to access political information. The second model predicts the vote and adds Internet use as one of the independent variables. In terms of the explanatory variables, one set of explanations focuses on the demographic and socio-economic characteristics of voters, namely their gender, age, education and location. Despite the overall growth in the size of the Internet using population in Australia it remains the case that Internet usage is higher among younger, better educated professionals and white-collar workers (Willis and Tranter, 2006). In addition, we would expect them to be more likely to be located in urban areas, where broadband access is more easily available at a competitive price.

Table 2.3 Voters' Use of the Internet During Elections, 1998-2004 (Percent)

	1998		2001		2004	
	All	Internet access	All	Internet access	All	Internet access
Don't have Internet access	73	na	41	na	33	na
Have access, didn't use	23	84	50	86	55	82
Yes, once or twice	3	10	6	10	6	8
Yes, several occasions	1	3	2	1	3	5
Yes, many times	1	3	1	3	3	5
Total (N)	100 (1,826)	100 (498)	100 (1,763)	100 (1,006)	100 (1,739)	100 (1,160)

Note: The question was: 'Did you make use of the Internet at all to get news or information about the 2004 federal election?' Sources: 1998-2004 AES.

**Table 2.4 Use of the Internet for Election Information (Ordinary Least Squares Regression Estimates)**

	Used Internet to access election information	
	Partial	Standard
<i>Socioeconomic Background</i>		
Age	-.003*	-.067*
Gender (male)	.128**	.086**
Tertiary education	.097*	.052*
Urban resident	.031	.050
<i>Patterns of Internet use</i>		
Length of time used Internet	.023	.050
Frequency of Internet use	.115**	.200**
<i>Election involvement</i>		
Interested in election	.190**	.116**
Discussed politics with others	.213**	.121**
Care who won election	.023	.014
<i>Media use</i>		
Followed election in newspapers	.058	.068
Followed election on television	-.012	-.013
Followed election on radio	-.010	-.014
Constant	-.484	
Adjusted R-sq	.155	
(N)	(1,081)	

\*\* p<.01, \*p<.05, two-tailed.

Note: Ordinary least squares regression estimates showing partial (b) coefficient and standardized (beta) coefficients predicting use of the Internet for election information. Estimates are restricted to voters who had Internet access. Source: 2004 AES.

Certainly the evidence from rural or regional areas reported by the Australian Bureau of Statistics over time has indicated a significant geographic bias in Internet access (Curtin, 2001-2002).

A second set of explanations is associated with patterns of Internet use itself, namely the length of time that the voter had been using the Internet, and the frequency with which they use it. We would expect that the longer the time and the greater the frequency of use, the greater their skill in using the technology and the more likely they would be to use the Internet to access political information. We might also expect those who use the Internet to have greater interest in the election, and to use other means of accessing and disseminating political information. Here we include variables measuring whether or not the voter discussed politics with others, cared about who won, and the frequency with which they followed election news on the television, radio and in the newspapers.

The first model, predicting Internet use to access election information, is estimated using an ordinary least squares regression equation, since the depend-

ent variable is nominal. The estimates in Table 2.4 show partial regression coefficients and standardized (beta) coefficients for each of the independent variables. The most important predictors are, not surprisingly, frequency of Internet use and election interest and involvement. Those who reported using the Internet frequently were significantly more likely to access the Internet for election information, as were those who were interested in the election and said that they discussed politics with others on a regular basis. Use of the traditional media during the election had no significant effect in determining whether or not the voter used the Internet. There are also consistent effects for the background variables, with males, younger voters and the university educated being more likely to use the new medium during the election. However, their overall impact is less than that for either patterns of Internet use or election involvement. Such a finding fits with other studies of online political participation in the United States and United Kingdom that have found traditional Socio-Economic Status (SES) resource models to be poor predictors once other variables tapping levels of Internet use or skills are taken into account (Krueger, 2002; Gibson *et al*, 2005a; Owen, 2005).

There are, then, distinct social, economic and behavioural groups that use the Internet. But does the use of the Internet for election information itself shape how people choose to vote, beyond these other factors? To make this estimate, Table 2.5 shows the results of a multivariate analysis among voters for the three main groupings, Labor, the Liberal-National coalition, and the Greens. Since the dependent variable has more than two categories, the appropriate technique is multinomial logistic regression. The results show parameter estimates and (parentheses) standard errors predicting three sets of contrasts in vote choice. Our most significant finding is the importance of Internet use in predicting the vote, in this case the contrast between the two major parties, Labor and the Liberal-National coalition.

Other things being equal, those who reported such Internet use were significantly more likely to vote Labor rather than for the Coalition. There is no similar effect for Internet use in the two other contrasts, between Labor and Green voters and Coalition and Green voters.

The results also show a variety of other patterns. In terms of other forms of media use, those who followed the election on television were more likely to be major party voters rather than Green voters; neither newspapers nor radio influenced the vote. Comparing following politics across the various media sources, the Internet was second only to television in political impact. Among other factors that were important in shaping the vote, Green voters were both younger and more likely to have a tertiary education than major party voters. Apart from Internet use, Labor and Coalition voters were distinguished only by Labor voters being more urban, discussing politics more frequently with others and by not caring who won the election—a reflection on their consistent trailing in the polls during the election campaign.

How do we explain the significant effect of Internet use on the vote? We do not know from the survey what individual websites voters were accessing, so we have no way of taking into account exposure. However, three explanations are possible. First, the effect may simply be an artefact of some other, uncontrolled, factor. Since we have taken into account a wide range of other factors, it is not clear what that variable might be. Second, it could be that there was simply more pro-Labor information available on the web during the election and it proved more persuasive than the information with a pro-Coalition bias. In particular, if one compares the number of anti-Howard sites to those attacking Latham then it would appear that there was certainly more information that might appeal to the pro-ALP segment of the electorate than to Coalition supporters (Chen, 2005). Third, taking a broader view of the information that would have been available to voters over time it may be that an anti-incumbency effect is also at work here. At the time of the election the Coalition government had been in office since 1996—around the time when the web was first taking off—thus the cumulative amount of material critical of them online might be expected to be greater than that focused on Labor, particularly in relation to highly emotive and divisive topics such as Iraq and treatment of refugees and immigrants.

## Conclusion

Given the 'pace-setting' role held by Australia at the turn of the twenty-first century in e-government and the overall technological readiness of its population, the idea presented at the start of this chapter that the federal election of 2004 might be a defining moment in the move toward online campaigning was perhaps not so far-fetched. As this review of the performance of the key players in that event has shown, however, the vital signs of the e-campaign among parties and candidates were on the whole rather faint. Certainly it does not appear that the country witnessed a Howard Dean-style breakthrough in terms of a candidate or party catapulting itself into public prominence through innovative uses of the new technologies. That said, some progress was made from the static approach favored in 2001, particularly among the smaller parties. Indeed, the results presented here challenge the idea that any normalization is taking place in online campaigning. While other countries may be seeing a divide opening up between the major and minor players in the quality of website production, Australia has retained a more egalitarian position on the matter. How far this balance is due to major parties' reticence, as opposed to minor parties' initiative, however, is clearly a question for future analysis. Once the major parties detect tangible returns on their investment in the new cybertools then we may see the competitive pressure on the less well-resourced organizations.

In light of the low-key approach taken by most political elites to the task of e-campaigning it is not surprising to discover the rather modest levels of interest among the Australian public in their online offerings. Nor is it surprising to find

Table 2.5 Voting and Internet Use (Multinomial Logistic Regression Estimates)

	Socioeconomic Background		
	Est	(SE)	
Age	.025**	(.010)	
Gender (male)	.050	(.262)	
Tertiary education	-1.072**	(.264)	
Urban resident	.107	(.106)	
Patterns of Internet use			
Length of time used Internet	-.073	(.104)	
Frequency of Internet use	-.060	(.111)	
Election involvement			
Interested in election	.038	(.346)	
Discussed politics with others	-.374	(.311)	
Care who won election	-.378	(.302)	
Media use			
Followed election in newspapers	-.154	(.182)	
Followed election on television	-.617**	(.173)	
Followed election on radio	-.028	(.138)	
Used Internet for election info	.092	(.155)	
Constant	-.237		
Nagelkerke R-sq	.724		
(N)	.176		(813)

	Coalition/Green		Labor/Coalition	
	Est	(SE)	Est	(SE)
Age	.022**	(.009)	.003	(.006)
Gender (male)	.288	(.258)	-.239	(.166)
Tertiary education	-1.248**	(.259)	-.175	(.177)
Urban resident	-.034	(.104)	.141*	(.068)
Patterns of Internet use				
Length of time used Internet	-.160	(.101)	.087	(.056)
Frequency of Internet use	.026	(.109)	-.086	(.068)
Election involvement				
Interested in election	-.052	(.340)	.089	(.219)
Discussed politics with others	-1.085**	(.309)	.710**	(.210)
Care who won election	.707*	(.300)	-1.085**	(.195)
Media use				
Followed election in newspapers	-.158	(.178)	.004	(.115)
Followed election on television	-.608**	(.171)	.009	(.116)
Followed election on radio	-.206	(.136)	.177	(.092)
Used Internet for election info	-.146	(.160)	.239*	(.118)

\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$ , two-tailed. Multinomial logistic regression showing parameter estimates and standard errors predicting three sets of contrasts between party voters. Source: 2004 AES.

that most of those who do access election information online tend to be more politically interested, better educated and younger than the average citizen. However, it is also notable that, after factoring in all the usual political and socio-economic correlates, regular use of the Internet in itself appears to make people more likely to access election news, a finding that provides some support for the mobilizing influence of the Internet.

We are still left with a conundrum in understanding why Australian elections so far have remained relatively impervious to online campaigning. One possible explanation is that the distinctiveness of Australia's campaign environment, with its remote and vast constituencies and compulsory system of voting, discourages the widespread piloting of largely untried tools to communicate with voters. In addition, it could be that there is a stronger adherence among Australian politicians to the conventional face-to-face or 'door-stepping' style of campaigning, as it termed locally, than exists among their counterparts in other countries. Finally, while low levels of voter interest may be reflective of parties not building enticing sites, for parties to invest in any new mode of communication they also first need to perceive a popular demand for it. At present that does not appear to exist, at least not to the degree one sees in the United States, where Internet campaigning has come of age.

## Notes

1. Figures from the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) in July 2001 estimated the number broadband customers to be only 122,800 (less than 1 percent of the adult population). By 2004-2005 this had increased exponentially, with Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) estimates reporting the number of households with broadband access to be just over one million (1.2 million). OECD statistics confirm the great leap forward with estimates of 0.8 broadband subscribers for every 100 inhabitants in 2001 rising to 7.7 by 2004. See OECD Broadband Statistics 2004 available at <[http://www.oecd.org/document/60/0,2340,en\\_2825\\_495656\\_2496764\\_1\\_1\\_1\\_1,00.html#data2004](http://www.oecd.org/document/60/0,2340,en_2825_495656_2496764_1_1_1_1,00.html#data2004)>. Accessed on 19 June 2006. Democrats working on vBlogging, 17 August 2005.
2. As Goot (1985, p.179) puts it, "in no other liberal democracy, it seems safe to say, have the permutations and combinations of electoral reform been as great."
3. Free airtime is also available on the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS), which is also government funded.
4. Estimates are from [australianpolitics.com](http://australianpolitics.com), an information/archive site run by Mr. Malcolm Farnsworth, a school teacher from Victoria since 1996. Archived material on candidate sites available at <[www.australianpolitics.com/elections/2001/websites.shtml](http://www.australianpolitics.com/elections/2001/websites.shtml)>. Accessed on 25/04/06. For the total number of candidates nominated see Behind the Scenes: The 2001 Election Report Published by the Australian Electoral Commission, Canberra. 2002. Available at <<http://www.aec.gov.au/content/When/elections/2001/bts/04noms.pdf>>. Accessed 2 May 2006.
5. The ACS has been conducted in all federal elections since 1987 (except 1998) and is based on a self-completion, post-election mail questionnaire sent to all

candidates from the major parties as well as a selection of significant minor parties (i.e. with parliamentary representation, i.e. the ALP, Liberals, Nationals, Greens and One Nation). (Gibson *et al*, 2005a).

6. See <<http://www.active.org.au/>>.
7. Quoted in: Maley, J. 2004. "I surf and I vote", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 July, p.27.
8. The higher AES estimates can be explained by the fact that the question is not time-specific about when individuals used the Internet and simply asks if they have access to the Internet.
9. See ABS Report, 8146.0 House Use of Information Technology, Australia, 2004-05 Released 15 December 2005. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra. Available at <<http://www.abs.gov.au/Ausstats/abs@.nsf/0/acc2d18cc958bc7bca2568a9001393ae? OpenDocument>>. Accessed 19 June 2006.
10. See Behind the Scenes: The 2001 Election Report p. 11 Published by the Australian Electoral Commission, Canberra (2002). Available at <<http://results.aec.gov.au/12246/pdf/BehindTheScenes.pdf>>. Accessed 3 May 2006.
11. Ward, S, J, Lusoli, W. and R. K. Gibson. (2004). Unpublished data from a UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) study 'Parliamentary Representation in the Internet Age'. Award No RES-335-25-0029. Available at [www.i-pol.org](http://www.i-pol.org).
12. ACS figures are based on self-reported data from the candidates and thus are susceptible to over-reporting. The estimates produced by Chen, and Ward *et al* were gathered by independent use of search engines and listings from party homepages—which can lead to under-reporting. The alternative methods of data collection also mean that the size of the population used to calculate the final reported figure differs significantly. Both Ward *et al* and Chen's calculations are based on the entire universe of candidates in the election, whereas the ACS relies on a much smaller sample (n =535) of candidates that chose to return the questionnaire. Even allowing for the differences in data collection and methods of calculation, however, it is clear that the ACS figures for Green candidates' sites are still far higher than those reported in the other studies. One possible explanation for this inflation may be that Green candidates viewed their well-developed individual pages on the party site as constituting their own campaign site, despite the questionnaire item referring specifically to a personally owned and operated election website.
13. "Crunching the numbers", *The Australian*, 23 September 2004, p.20.