

# Victoria University of Wellington

## Chair in E-Government

### Research Project Summary

#### *The Use of New Media by Political Parties in the 2008 National Elections*

### **Introduction**

This empirical study involves qualitative research into forms and ways in which political parties in New Zealand make use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) in the 2008 elections, and their implications. The project started in August 2008 and will focus on exploring changes in both external relationships and the internal organisation of political parties as a result of using ICTs.

### **Key Issues and Questions**

Newly available media, such as the Internet and mobile phones, offer opportunities for political parties to develop new forms of communication with the electorate as well as with their MPs, party members and internal staff. ICTs may offer, for instance, information provision in multiple (media) forms, targeted information provision to specific user groups (narrowcasting), personalised information provision to individuals, and direct and massive forms of response and interaction with the electorate.

These opportunities of improved access, efficiency and effectiveness are increasingly acknowledged by political parties. An upcoming election may further increase the uptake and use of new ICTs by political parties (e.g. US presidential elections). Nowadays, many political parties have their own website and offer email contact details for their MPs. Moreover, political parties appear to be interested in using newly available electronic means like video-sharing, blogs, instant messaging and SMS messages, for reaching out to potential voters or establishing more efficient relationships with internal staff members or MPs, for example. ICTs can also be used for trying to predict voting behaviour (e.g. instant polls), or, even more negatively, to quickly spread rumours, incidents or negative statements, which may lead to an uncontrollable influence on political image or opinion development (Sunstein, 2001).

These developments bring up questions about the forms and ways in which political parties in New Zealand use ICTs in the 2008 national elections, and what the implications are for their external relationships and internal organisation. In general, three visions on the meaning of ICTs for the democratic process can be distinguished (e.g. Boogers & Voerman, 2005):

- 1) mobilisation or *empowerment thesis*: the use of ICTs would support the empowerment of political parties and individuals and, with that, enhance democratic participation;

- 2) *reinforcement thesis*: the use of ICTs would lead to the reinforcement of existing power balances and unequally distributed patterns of democratic participation; and
- 3) *amplification thesis*: effects of the use of ICTs will depend on the context in which ICTs are used and will intensify political-cultural characteristics therefore (e.g. amplification of the MMP-system in NZ).

### **Key details**

The overall purpose of this project is to undertake an exploratory study into how political parties in New Zealand make use of ICTs in and around the 2008 national election, and their implications. The following central research questions are suggested:

*What are forms and ways in which political parties in New Zealand make use of ICTs in the 2008 national election period?*

*What are the implications of these ICT uses for both external relationships and the internal organisation of political parties?*

*What recommendations can be made regarding the use of ICTs by political parties for the next elections?*

The research project will include the following research methods:

- an academic literature study to explore international theory and practice regarding the use of ICTs by political parties, and their implications;
- semi-structured interviews with staff members of political parties, party leaders, MPs and political candidates in the 2008 national elections;
- a workshop in which findings of the research will be further discussed and evaluated with key stakeholders and experts from the public sector and academia (Chatham House rules applied). This workshop will be organised after the elections, end of February/beginning of March 2009.

The project will result in:

- a workshop with key stakeholders and experts in this area;
- a written report setting out research findings; and
- an academic paper for presentation at an international conference

This research project will be completed by end of April 2009.

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