Misinformation and disinformation narratives in the 2023 New Zealand General Election

Logically.

Disclaimers

Background on report

The New Zealand Government is seeking to support a "whole-of-society" approach to build understanding and resilience against the harms of disinformation, that can be led primarily by those outside government. This approach recognises the need to maintain an open internet and uphold the right to freedom of expression. The overall objective for this report and others produced by Logically as commissioned by DPMC is to promote best practice to provide a holistic, accurate, and trustworthy picture of the online environment in New Zealand, and how disinformation impacts that environment. The election integrity reporting produced by Logically covered the 2 weeks before and 2 weeks after the October General Election monitored four specific categories of misinformation, disinformation and malinformation (MDM).

Executive Summary

Over the period, **27 Sep - 11 Oct 23**, Logically monitored narratives aligned to one of four categories of harm that could be identified as misinformation, disinformation or malinformation (MDM):

- MDM that could lead to voter suppression (through intimidation, coercion or persuasion);

- MDM that could pose a threat to public order;

- MDM that could pose a threat to public safety;

- MDM that could undermine confidence in the democratic process (for example through factually inaccurate information about the administration of an election, foreign information manipulation or interference, or coordinated inauthentic behaviour.)

During the reporting period, Logically analysed **59,659** unique online mentions by **4,741** unique authors within these four categories of MDM related to the New Zealand General Elections. The parameters of Logically's reporting and research collection being focused on election related MDM means we cannot benchmark these figures against broader online discussions of the election that would not be categorised as MDM.

No foreign information manipulation or interference (FIMI) or coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB) was identified during the collection period. The low amount of MDM targeting the General Election as a result of discussion of other major world events taking precedence in the New Zealand information space may demonstrate a lack of foreign interest in shaping the information environment. One account displaying inauthentic traits was identified, but was not part of wider coordinated activity.

Within this 2 week reporting period in advance of the General Election, Logically identified three narratives that may have posed a low level of risk to public safety, and undermined confidence in the democratic process, however these were highly limited in reach to only a small minority of the population. Those narratives were:

1. Claims that votes cast prior to election day are not safe;

2. The targeting of a Māori candidate by social media users following an alleged incident. Three convergent narratives were identified, alleging:

   a. The alleged incident was a "false flag" operation;

   b. The alleged incident had been politicised to attract "sympathy votes";

   c. the alleged incident was being used to promote "anti-white" messaging.

3. Claims regarding different means of voter suppression

The **primary MDM narrative targeting the integrity of the election is that votes made prior to the election would not be safe.** Users have claimed early votes would be interfered with, stolen or altered before being officially counted.
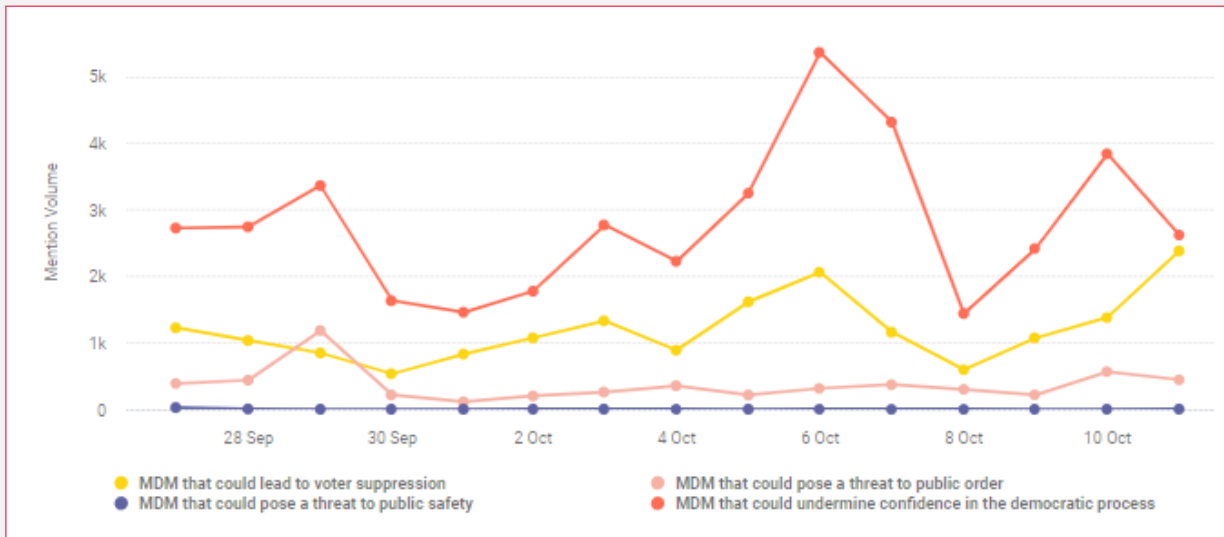
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Fig. 1. Online mention volumes of each of the four MDM categories monitored within the research environment (27 Sep - 11 Oct 23).
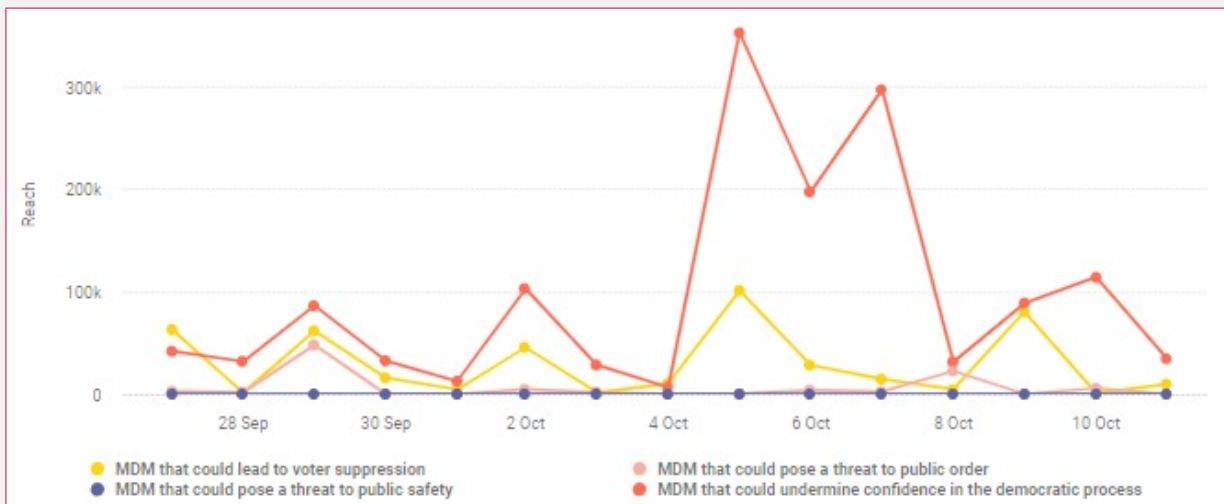

Fig. 2. Reach of online mentions related to the four MDM categories monitored within the research environment (27 Sep - 11 Oct 23).

The charts above show online mention volumes relating to mis- and disinformation that may have impacted the election, and reach of those mentions. Reach is calculated by the engagements on a post, the followers of the original author, and an assessed number of viewers of a post. The charts above show that certain posts on 5 and 7 Oct 23 attracted a significantly high reach within the New Zealand information environment. The high reach was attained by their influential status within the New Zealand information environment.

MDM targeting the election peaked at **5,373** online mentions on 6 Oct 23. One post amplified a conspiracy theory narrative that accuses the New Zealand government of collusion with the World Economic Forum (WEF). This post attracted **470** likes, **128** reposts and over **14,000** views.

Posts generally targeted various political parties for their policies on immigration, race, and COVID. MDM targeting Māori peaked with **44** online mentions on 2 Oct 23, with posts focusing on an incident relating to a Māori candidate, while others were targeting the Treaty of Waitangi.
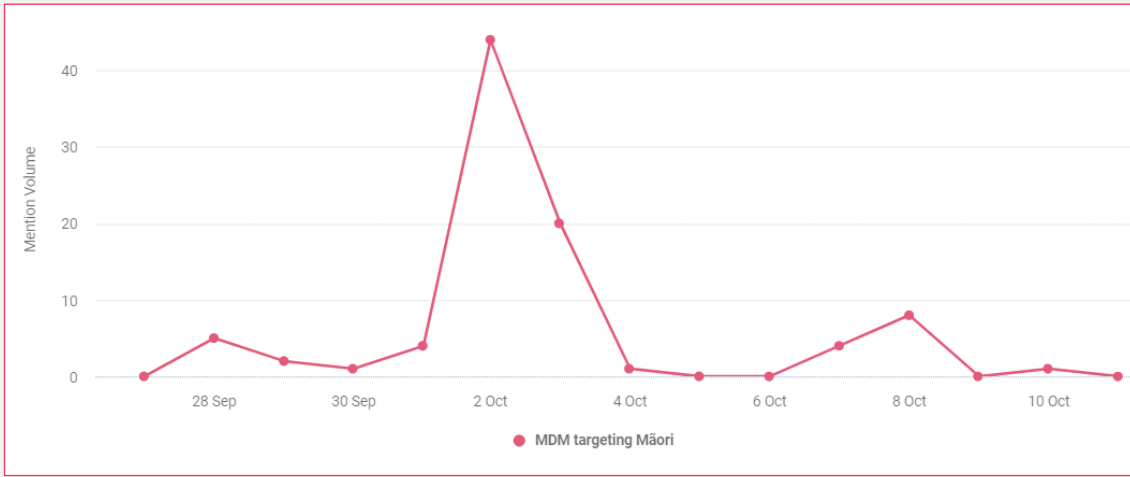
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Fig. 3. MDM targeting Māori.

Narratives questioning the integrity of the General Election are likely to persist among those who may have questioned the integrity and results of the election. Additionally, the spread of factually inaccurate information is likely to have undermined some users' confidence in the democratic process as some posts claimed the information is evidence of ongoing election fraud. The significant reach of these posts related to MDM of narratives undermining confidence in the democratic process (over **352,000**) demonstrates how a small number of highly influential figures can spread influence messaging across the information environment.[1]

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1 While it is possible to geofence users and posts on social media, it is not possible to geofence a specific post's reach. It is possible that a portion of the users reached by these posts may not be based in New Zealand. Logically has opted to include data about global reach for the purpose of demonstrating the means by which a single post can influence significant numbers of people.
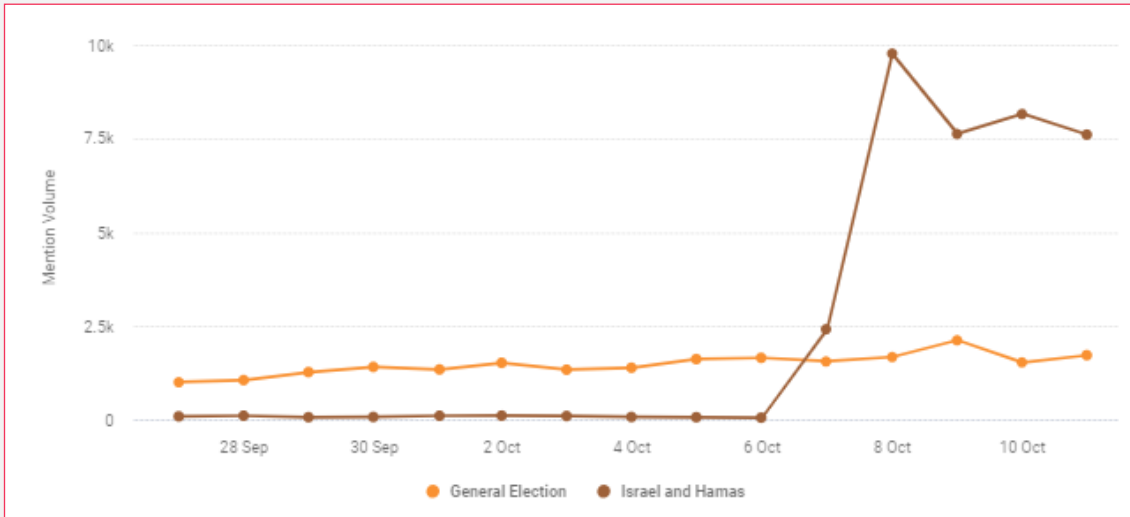
Fig. 4. Online mention volumes of selected keywords related to the New Zealand election compared to mention volumes of selected keywords related to Israel and Hamas within New Zealand (27 Sep - 11 Oct).

Between 4 - 11 Oct 23 the top ten trending topics in New Zealand on X were not about the General Election, but instead focused on the attacks in Israel and subsequent Israeli declaration of war against Hamas on 9 Oct 23. This may have resulted in MDM targeting the election remaining consistently low throughout the reporting period (averaging **1,469** daily mentions of the word "election" geofenced to New Zealand over a 15 day period). Prior to 6 Oct, the average daily online mentions of Israel and Hamas within New Zealand's information environment was between **60 - 110.** Additionally a majority of the top most interacted pages on Meta platforms were rugby pages, not pages about the General Election, political parties, or candidates. The chart above shows online mention volumes relating to Israel and Hamas compared to overall online mention volumes relating to the General Election.

2 For the purpose of this comparison, Logically limited the search parameters to explicit mentions of keywords directly associated with the election. These figures are therefore not representative of the total amount of online discourse surrounding the election identified within Logically's research environment, which includes topics that are likely to influence or contribute to election-related MDM.
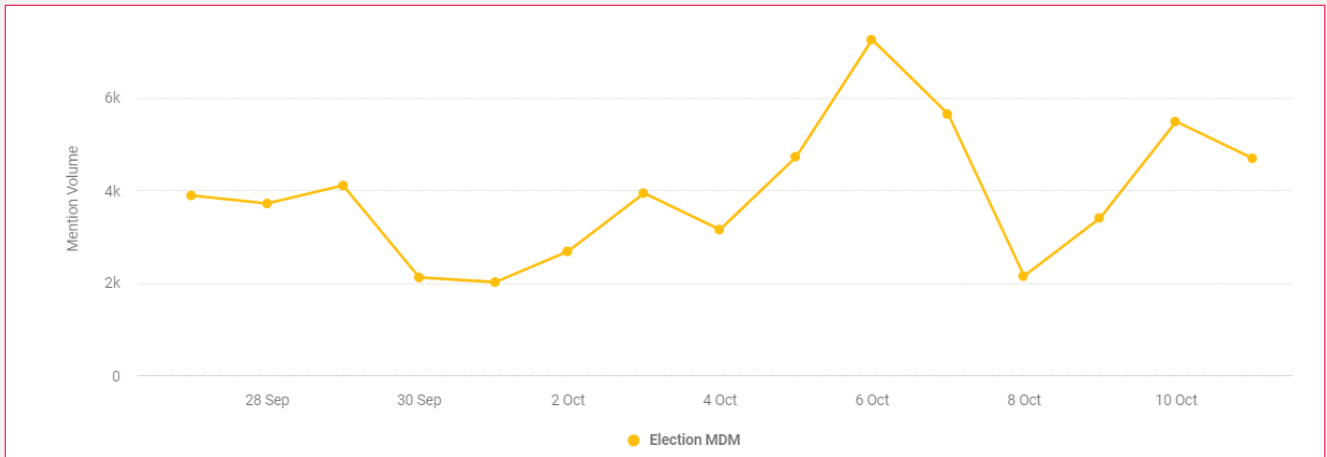
Two-week Comparison

Fig. 5. Two-week comparison of online mentions regarding the four categories of election MDM (27 Sep - 3 Oct & 4 - 11 Oct).

Fig. 5. highlights the temporary increase in mentions relating to the election within the research environment over the two week reporting period. The mentions match terms within the research environment established to monitor the four categories of MDM in the information environment surrounding the election.

The diagram in Fig. 5 shows that the number of matches of these terms increased during the second half of the reporting period of 4 - 11 Oct. For example, the peak on 6 Oct was caused by online mentions of a post referenced above, calling for conspiracy related action, such as defunding participation in the WEF, whereas this did not occur in the previous reporting period of 27 Sep - 4 Oct.

Logically observed limited sustained engagement with the narratives identified at the beginning of the reporting cycle. This is almost certainly due to the fact that online discourse is reactive, and narratives are primarily driven by occurrences in the mainstream media and news cycle. This is evidenced in the lack of sustained engagement with the narratives that emerged following the alleged incident at the home of a Māori political candidate on 25 Sep. It is likely that social media users stopped engaging with the narrative following the identification of the perpetrator by Waikato Police and the issuance of a trespass notice.

Trending Topics

Fig. 6. Word cloud showing topics discussed within the research environment (27 Sep - 4 Oct 23).

The word cloud in Fig. 6 shows the key topics discussed within the research environment, geofenced to New Zealand between 27 Sep and 4 Oct 23. Names of individuals and political parties have been removed. One post by a user discussed the alleged incident at the home of a political candidate and claimed that there was media bias in supporting particular candidates. This post attracted **30** comments, **89** likes, **10** reposts and a reach of **47,625**.

The word cloud in Fig. 7 shows the key topics discussed within the research environment, geofenced to New Zealand between 4 and 11 Oct 23. Names of individuals and political parties have been removed. Posts calling for conspiracy related action, such as defunding participation in the WEF, also gained support, with one post attracting **37** comments, **471** likes and **130** reposts, with a total reach of **88,076**. Other conspiratorial actors within New Zealand have targeted the "mainstream media", alleging the "mainstream media" is undermining certain political candidates. One post attracted **43** comments, **319** likes, **61** reposts and a total reach of **77,562**.

Methodology

This analysis used proprietary tools and analytical methodologies applied to publicly available information[3] to develop pattern and trend analyses of online behaviour, and misinformation and disinformation activities. Logically's methodology for the development and identification of patterns, trends, narratives, and coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB) analysis, including malicious online behaviour techniques, tactics, and procedures (TTPs) was developed in accordance with the DISARM Framework, Observatory for OSINT Guidelines, Phased-Based Tactical Analysis of Online Operations, the MITRE ATT&CK framework, and Logically's open-source intelligence (OSINT) tradecraft.

Logically does not monitor nor report on any expression by political parties on candidates where such expression may fall under election campaigning. Only MDM that meets one of the four criteria (MDM that could lead to voter suppression, MDM that could pose a threat to public order, MDM that poses a threat to public safety, and MDM that could undermine confidence in the democratic process) is collected and analysed for this report.

Logically use a bespoke analysis platform that ingests data from across the internet through crafted queries using Boolean logic and researched keyword combinations. Our analysts use this in conjunction with a suite of additional tools. This is referred to as the '**research environment**'. The research environment does not constitute all data on social media platforms or the internet, but is filtered to include the keywords that have been entered. Data sources may include, amongst others, *X, Facebook, Instagram, Telegram, TikTok, YouTube, Reddit, and 4chan*. The research environment was geofenced and limited to New Zealand.

Due to the manner in which information is collected, any data on social media platforms that has been deleted, or posted from accounts that have since been removed or suspended, will not populate in the research environment. As such, figures within this report are accurate as of Oct 2023, and may not reflect the information environment at specific points in time, due to accounts being suspended and posts being deleted.

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[3] *Publicly available information is any information which is contained in a publicly available publication. Publicly available publications include things like: Books, Magazines, Newspapers, Information posted publicly online, and Public registers. privacy.org.nz*

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Votes Prior to Election Day Are Not Safe

Voting in the 2023 General Election began on 2 Oct 23 and closed on 14 Oct 23. Users of social media posted evidence they had engaged in the democratic process, such as posting photos of their voting cards or presence at voting stations across New Zealand.

Social media users of both X and other online forums, expressed concerns that advanced votes (those made prior to 14 Oct 23) were at risk of being "stolen". These claims included that double voting may have occurred due to New Zealand's lack of a requirement for photo ID, or that misplaced/stolen EasyVote cards could be used for fraudulent purposes. One post attracted over **5,900** views, **21** reposts and **115** likes, in which the post claimed that they "[got] in early so vote can't be stolen!"

The integrity of voting stations was also called into question. One forum user stated a family member who works in a public building where a polling booth is located had claimed that voting boxes are stored in a room with a "special" lock. In response, users asked "what is their price for a cut key?" to access the locked rooms where voting boxes are located, calling into question the integrity of the voting officials, the building staff and the democratic process, if votes could be intercepted.

Fig. 8. Claims advanced votes are not safe prior to election day.

Claims of "stolen votes" or interception of ballot boxes will likely persist as a narrative and will be amplified by online users seeking to shape the information environment and maintain allegations of wrongdoing following the general election. By sowing discourse in the early stages of the election, claims post-election will resonate with those who held the integrity of the election in doubt.

Various Narratives Targeting a Political candidate

On 25 Sep 23, a Māori political candidate reported to police an incident at her home (initially reported as an alleged invasion, vandalism, and the delivery of a threatening letter). On 29 Sep 23, official police statements identified this had been the third such incident targeting this specific candidate's home address that week.[4] The candidate claimed on 29 Sep 23 the attack was "premeditated and targeted, and politically motivated" however, on 6 Oct 23 New Zealand Police stated that they "do not believe that the incidents have been racially motivated or coordinated."

Analysis identified three convergent narratives related to the event that were used to propagate MDM:

- **False flag –** The first narrative to appear was propagated by social media users on X and other online forums, speculating the incident was a "false flag" action but failed to identify the instigator or the purpose of the attack.

- **Sympathy vote –** A second narrative claimed the publication of the event was being used to gain a "sympathy vote."

- **Māori Crime –** A third narrative arose among users who adapted the first two narratives but then claimed the incident was perpetrated by Māori as a way to delegitimise the crimes.

The third narrative claimed the incident was being used to "smear the right/white people". Political leaders commented on the issue, in response to claims that the crime was committed as a consequence of "race-baiting" within election campaigning.

These three convergent narratives demonstrated unified messaging focused on this candidate, in an effort to undermine their legitimacy and integrity during their campaign. Narratives that accuse or denigrate Māori could find an audience within the far-right community, and lead to further tensions, which could lead to offline action taken by far-right individuals as a result.

[4] *[Hyperlink](), accessed 2 Oct 23*

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Multiple Methods of Voter Suppression

New Zealand requires voters to be eligible and enrolled in order to vote in the General Election. However, a far-right media platform made posts across several social media sites that claimed voters do not need to be enrolled on the electoral roll in order to vote. These posts misrepresented statements made in a video by a party leader about the delay of EasyVote packs to over a million New Zealanders.

Users on Meta, Telegram, and X claimed that the purported lack of requirements for enrolment or proof of identity would undermine the election's integrity by potentially enabling citizens to cast multiple votes. One user posted about the "corruption" of the election due to the lack of a requirement for enrollment or photo identification needed to vote, which generated **1,294** views, **20** likes, and **8** reposts.
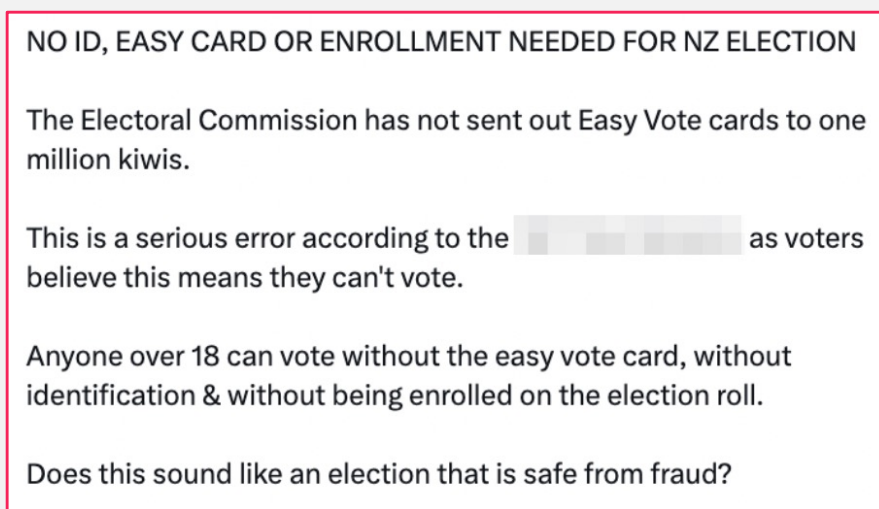
NO ID, EASY CARD OR ENROLLMENT NEEDED FOR NZ ELECTION

The Electoral Commission has not sent out Easy Vote cards to one million kiwis.

This is a serious error according to the [REDACTED] as voters believe this means they can't vote.

Anyone over 18 can vote without the easy vote card, without identification & without being enrolled on the election roll.

Does this sound like an election that is safe from fraud?

Fig. 9. Claims voters do not need to enrol to vote.

Social media users on X and other online forums claimed rural voters would be unable to vote on election day as a result of hundreds of polling places in remote areas being closed. Users claimed closing polling booths on election day was a "threat" to the integrity of the electoral process in New Zealand. The Electoral Commission responded to these claims in a statement that voting places in remote areas are not being closed on election day and the number of remote voting places open on election day is comparable to previous years.

Some users claimed that rural voters were being forced to vote early as a result of polling booth closures. Users claimed that these closures were a means of "stealing" the election as advanced votes could be altered or otherwise manipulated in favour of a particular candidate or party.

Fig. 10. Claims closing polling booths in rural areas is election fraud.

Misinformation concerning voting requirements continued to circulate through the information environment. This misinformation was spread by the far-right community as it was shared by a far-right media platform. A review of comments accompanying the posts that made these claims suggested that many online users believed the information to be true and that they spread the information to alert other voters ahead of the elections, likely resulting in voter confusion.

The narrative regarding rural voters persisted throughout this election period, amplified by users seeking to shape the information environment prior to and beyond the election. Although the Electoral Commission released a statement debunking the narrative, the post did not have as wide of a reach or as high engagement as posts spreading the narrative on social media. The claim that advanced votes can be "stolen" or manipulated has persisted as it provides explanatory support to those seeking to question or undermine perception of the election's integrity. This narrative could be amplified beyond the conclusion of the election by users questioning the legitimacy of the election results.

Foreign Information Manipulation and Interference

No foreign information manipulation or interference (FIMI) or coordinated inauthentic behaviour (CIB) was identified during the collection period. The low amount of MDM identified as a result of discussion of other major world events taking precedence in the New Zealand information space (including events in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, and sporting fixtures) may demonstrate a lack of foreign interest in shaping the information environment. Online activity connected with the New Zealand election did not indicate any Coordinated Inauthentic Behaviour (CIB) targeting voters or the political process during the collection period. Observed activity fell within parameters expected of organic and authentic behaviour.

One account was identified by Logically and was responsible for posting **589** times between 27 Sep and 5 Oct, displaying inauthentic behaviour. Posts targeted Western democratic countries such as Canada, the US and New Zealand. Inauthentic behaviour demonstrated includes the frequency of posts, the type of post (original, reply, repost) and other types of engagement, with the account opting for sharing/reposting and commenting on high reaching original posts, to share predominantly anti-globalist and anti-COVID messaging. The account was not identified in the research environment after 5 Oct 23.
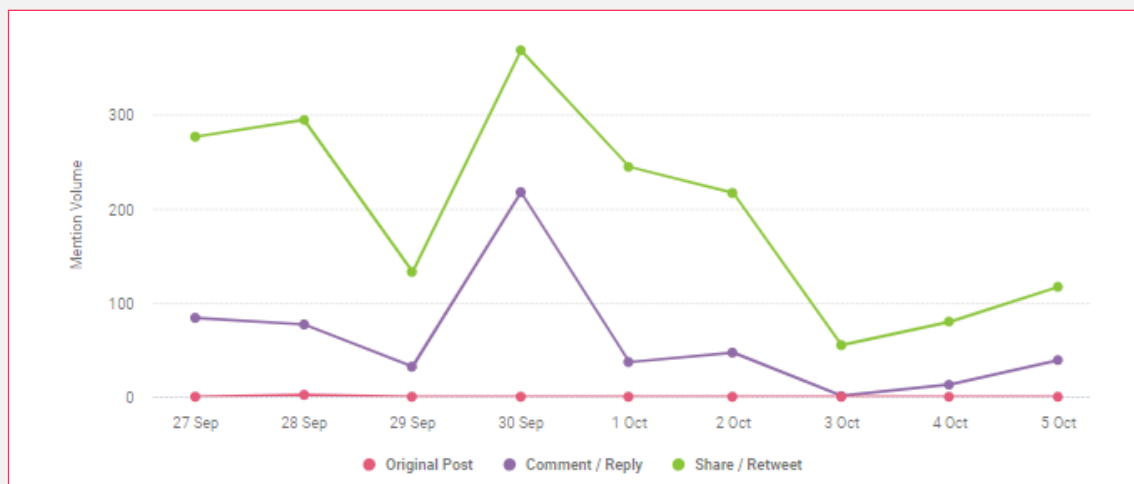

Fig. 11. Online activity by the suspected inauthentic account.

Indicators for CIB include: recent date of account creation; high frequency of shares/posts; shared user bases; shared topics, messaging, keywords, and phrases; co-ordinated deployment of links and URLs; a high ratio of posts or shares to interactions or replies; lack of conversational engagement with other platform users.

About Logically

Logically combines advanced AI with human intelligence and expertise to tackle harmful and problematic online content at scale. The company's mission is to enhance civic discourse, protect democratic debate and process, and provide access to trustworthy information.

In 2021, Logically was named one of the world's most innovative artificial intelligence companies by Fast Company and won the Rising Star in Tech CogX Award. Logically has helped mitigate threats to elections in the United States, United Kingdom, and India since 2017.

Visit Logically.AI for more information, or contact us at info@logically.ai