

Why 2024 Will Be the Year of the Oligarchs

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X (formerly known as Twitter), SpaceX and Tesla CEO Elon Musk reacts during the UK Artificial Intelligence (AI) Safety Summit at Bletchley Park, in central England, on Nov. 1, 2023. LEON NEAL/POOL/AFP via Getty Images

We don't usually make predictions. After all, our research is based on the increasing uncertainty that is exploited by oligarchs — and uncertain situations can't be predicted.

But we are going to make a prediction about which we are, to use investment banking language, highly confident: 2024 is going to be the year of the oligarch, defined as those who acquire wealth or power, then utilize one to gain the other.

We say this for three reasons.

First, we predict that significantly more oligarchs will be heads of states or governments by the end of 2024 than today. Second, oligarchs' increased wealth will result in more influence over global agenda-setting. And, third, the rapid development of artificial intelligence (AI) is creating a radical power shift benefiting a small number of oligarchs with investments in this technology.

Elections for 33 heads of state are scheduled in 2024. Of these, current opinion polls suggest that two are likely to lead to oligarchs taking office. In Indonesia, Prabowo Subianto, the current defense minister with an estimated net worth (ENW) of \$160 million, leads significantly in opinion polls. With

Indonesia's economy the seventh largest in the world, as measured by GDP PPP, Prabowo's election is likely to be one of the most significant oligarch events of 2024.

The second oligarch we assess as likely to gain power is Ricardo Martinelli (ENW = \$1.1 billion) in Panama. That country's president from 2009 to 2014, Martinelli has faced a variety of legal challenges since leaving office. He was convicted in 2023 on money laundering charges and sentenced to 10 years in prison. Yet the latest opinion polls show Martinelli strongly ahead of his opponents.

Six other oligarchs face reelection in 2024 and are likely to be victorious. In Russia, Vladimir Putin (ENW \$6 billion) is very likely to win a fifth term in office; current opinion polls by the Levada Center show Putin with an 83% approval rating. El Salvador's Nayib Bukele (ENW = \$20 million) is also very likely to win a second term, although this reelection has required him to bend the Salvadoran constitution to a breaking point. Azerbaijan's Ilhan Aliyev (ENW = \$900 million) will face no serious opposition and will be reelected to a fifth term. Luis Abinader (ENW = \$76 million) in the Dominican Republic, Paul Kagame (ENW = \$500 million) in Rwanda, and Surangel Whipps Jr. (ENW = \$20 million) in Palau will likely return to their offices for another term in 2024.

There are a few oligarchs running for office as heads of state who seem unlikely to prevail. Mexico's Xóchitl Gálvez (ENW = \$10 million-100 million range) will likely not prevail over her opponent, who is backed by the incumbent president. In Moldova, Renato Usatîi (ENW = \$10 million-100 million range), associated with Russian interests, does not have much of a chance in a country that recently commenced formal European Union accession talks.

Although hardly in the same category as Putin and the other foreign oligarchs above, America has its own versions of oligarchs — in particular, the numerous multibillionaires (what earlier generations might have referred to as "plutocrats," "tycoons," "moguls" or "barons") who operate largely off the radar in shaping public opinions, tastes and behaviors or in setting public policies and political agendas. Many people would include Donald Trump (ENW = \$2.6 billion) in that category as well, particularly given his and his advisers' statements about what they would do in a second White House term.

For now, the former president remains the most likely Republican candidate for president in 2024. Whether he can beat President Joe Biden, we are not prepared to predict — but it is worth noting that a majority of current opinion polls show a Trump victory, while prediction markets remain less certain. Yet, whether he wins or loses, Trump continues to shape contemporary American politics to degrees that can only be compared with such oligarch-like figures as Charles Koch (ENW = \$62 billion), the chairman and CEO of Koch Industries, Google co-founder Larry Page (ENW = \$126 billion), or entrepreneur and Twitter/X owner Elon Musk (ENW = \$229 billion), among many others.

Agenda-setting oligarchs like Koch and Musk will continue to gain power for one simple reason: They continue to accumulate wealth. Musk's net worth has increased from \$219 billion in 2022 to at least \$229 billion today, making him the world's wealthiest person. Koch's net worth reportedly fell somewhat in 2023 due to succession planning, but his long-standing funding of libertarian and conservative causes, candidates, and organizations assures him and his followers of power long into the future.

Finally, AI has radically increased in power during 2023, and its owners and sponsors are likely to benefit from this development in 2024. Among the obvious beneficiaries are those like Page at Google/Alphabet, Sam Altman (ENW = \$500 million to \$700 million) at OpenAI, and his partners at Microsoft, who will create and control AI development and use, at least in its early stages.

The question is, are we ready for what these figures and forces will do to us in 2024?

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Their book, "The Oligarchs' Grip: Fusing Wealth and Power," is published by De Gruyter. They are establishing The Center for the Study of Oligarchs to study this important phenomenon.