

Trends in International Politics 2024

Happy Election Year!

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The geopolitical tensions exacerbated by the Russia-Ukraine conflict and the Gaza crisis somehow concealed “the next source of turbulence in the polycrisis era” (Curran & Crawford, 2023): 2024 has been dubbed a super election year or even the biggest election year in history.

The polls, which will be held in 77 countries, will involve 4.2 billion voters i.e.

8 of the world's 10 most populous countries, 3 of the 5 permanent members of the UN Security Council, 8 European NATO members - and, probably, the U.K. - and 3 of the 5 founders of the BRICS, will hold elections in 2024

53% of humanity. Thirty-eight countries will elect their president, and 39 will vote in legislative elections. The countries where the decisive ballots will be held include 8 of the world's 10 most populous countries, 3 of the 5 permanent members of the UN Security Council, 8 European NATO members - and, probably, the U.K. - and 3 of the 5 founders of the BRICS. The voting countries account for over 60% of global GDP.

None of these elections, of course, will match the media impact of the U.S. presidential race culminating in November, the ‘elephant in the room’. However, the dimensions of some are impressive. On 14 February, Indonesia will host the world’s largest single-day

election, with more than 250,000 candidates competing for 20,000 offices at all political levels (Krismantari & Ramadhani, 2023). The general elections to be held in India over several weeks, between April and mid-May, to

elect 543 members of the Lok Sabha, the lower house of the national parliament, will involve 945 million registered voters (*The Economic Times*, 2023).

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decade, while setting the tone for global interactions into the 2030s.

Some might transform key nations’ foreign policies and relationships with big powers, starting with the United States — whose own policies, of course, could take a radical new direction if Mr. Trump wins the presidency (*The Washington Post*, 2023). In Mexico, the vote on 2 June could impact cooperation with its northern neighbor, which faces growing polarization over border management issues. Some others will endorse key political successions, like in Indonesia where charismatic President Joko Widodo will step down from the leadership, or in South-Africa, where ruling African National Congress faces the prospect of losing its overall

majority, forcing it to govern the country in a coalition with other parties.

In a few cases, electoral processes will run under the threatening shadow of hostile neighbors, such as South Korea (10 April) or Taiwan which, on 13 January, defied the threats of mainland China

2024 will be a key test for the health of democracy. The forthcoming elections will shape the second half of our decade, while setting the tone for global interactions into the 2030s

and gave the Democratic Progressive Party a third-straight term in the presidency (Eder, 2024; Mathews, 2023).¹

A few will be organized in politically unstable countries such as South Sudan, which does not seem in position to hold free, fair, and secure general elections in December, or in Mali, where a military *coup* overthrew the democratically elected government and where France’s eviction fuels the battle among foreign countries for influence (Bazail-Eimil, 2024).

Major elections in 2024 will not be limited just to nation-states. In the European Union, some 400 million voters across 27 countries will elect the European Parliament in June.

2024 will be a key test for the health of democracy. It might witness the deepening of the rift between a besieged model of liberal democracy and spreading illiberalism around the

world. Disinformation and "fake news" will weigh heavily on electoral systems that have already been called into question. At the start of this new year, let us wait a bit

before raising our glass to the health of democracy...

2024: A “première”, but not a guarantee of democracy

Merely organizing a ballot does not guarantee a smooth and fair electoral process. Just 8 (15%) of the countries voting in 2024 are considered full democracies. 40% are labelled “flawed democracies” (India, Indonesia, South Africa, and the United States). 17% are “hybrid regimes” (Pakistan, Senegal, Tunisia). 28% are “authoritarian regimes” (Iran, Russia, Rwanda, Venezuela) (Meakem, 2024).

Many of the forthcoming elections will be marred by restrictions on freedom of speech and association and an absence of effective oversight. Several will

¹ It should have been the case for Ukraine (31 March), until President Zelensky, in November 2023, rejected

the idea of holding polls in time of war, labeling the topic as “irresponsible”.

entrench illiberal or authoritarian rulers with astronomical approval rating but dubious democratic credentials. The parliamentary election to be held in North Korea on 10 April to elect the 687 members of the 15th Supreme People's Assembly offers of course the most despicable caricature. In the absence of an opposition, it looks like the people of Russia will be left with no other choice than endorsing incumbent President Vladimir Putin's candidature for a sixth term. In Rwanda (15 July), the only uncertainty will be the extent of the triumph of the outgoing dictator, Paul Kagame, who is seeking a fourth term in office: 95 or 98%? In Venezuela (December), the opposition candidate, Maria Corina Machado, has been ousted from the presidential election that the head of state, Nicolas Maduro, is seeking to lock up. In Salvador (4 February), extravagant President Nayib Bukele is running for reelection despite constitutional restriction. In India, Narendra Modi's third term appears inevitable, despite obvious erosion of democratic governance.

A world disillusioned about democracy

Although A. T. Little and A. Meng evidenced that the common claim of massive global democratic decline is not clearly supported by empirical evidence (Little & Meng, 2024), the 2024

elections are taking place against a backdrop of spreading illiberalism around the world, the weakening of independent institutions in some of the big democracies, and a creeping disillusionment in advanced democracies, especially among younger people who are oscillating between apathy and alternative action (Berthin, 2023).

Anti-system candidates now win 70% of elections in the free world, compared to less than 30% in the 2000s (Baverez, 2024). In Europe, far-right parties' gains in EU parliament elections - including euroskeptic elements such as the German AfD - could make them the Parliament's third force (Griera, 2023) and give them access to prominent parliamentary committee leadership posts, which they were blocked from taking after the 2019 election (Herszenhorn & De la Baume, 2019).

In Africa, voters are disappointed by the way democracy works. Nine rulers have taken power by force since 2020. According to opinion polls, a growing number of Africans would be prepared to accept a military government (Saint-Paul, 2024).

The American presidential election promises to be so toxic and polarized that it will surely cast more shadow over

world politics. The dysfunction of American democracy has really given antidemocratic forces a lifeline.

The year of the AI election²

Security is the cornerstone of any democratic process. Ensuring that the Internet is trusted, secure, reliable, and accessible for the public and those working in the election space is critical to any free and fair election.

The potential role of Artificial Intelligence in political campaigning is well-known. But AI might as well affect electoral regulations and the actual running of elections themselves, i.e. the electoral system, hence undermining the legitimacy of the democratic process (MacCarthaigh, 2023). Used by foreign governments or their agents, false narratives and conspiracy theories instill the poison of doubt everywhere (Chavalarias, 2022). More sophisticated cyber attacks could also target election infrastructure.

2024 will be the first wave of elections since powerful generative AI tools like ChatGPT and image creators like Midjourney went mainstream (Acres,

2023). The risk is high that polls across the globe this year will be a 'prime target' for countries looking to spread disinformation and undermine democracy, EU chief diplomat Josep Borrell warned (Borrell, 2024). In its Global Risks report 2024, the World

In its Global Risks report 2024, the World Economic Forum ranges misinformation and disinformation as the most severe global risk anticipated over the next two years

Economic Forum ranges misinformation and disinformation as the most severe global risk anticipated over the next two years (WEF, 2024, 8).

At the same time, excessive concern about deepfakes could become a problem of its own, leading people to distrust everything (Stern, 2024). We should resist the temptation for technological sensationalism, and instead focus on capturing the real dynamics of these forthcoming elections, Kate Dommett, Professor of Digital Politics at the University of Sheffield, advises (Dommett, 2023).

At the end of 2024, the ideological landscape worldwide will have been partially recomposed. Despite numerous obstacles, it is a reason for optimism: the backhanded compliment that autocrats such as V. Putin feel they must pay democracy by holding elections, even if they are a sham,

² This title has been inspired by Jacob Stern (see bibliography).

implicitly concedes that, in the modern world, the people's votes are the only universally recognized source of political legitimacy. "This norm is the hard-won achievement of centuries, one that the

year of elections will surely test but just might reinforce" (*The Washington Post*, 2023).

Happy Election Year!

oiip's 10 elections to observe in 2024³

Country (Alphabetical order)	Type of election	Date	Main challenges
Austria	Legislative	September to be confirmed	Far right Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs (FPÖ) likely to make gains and even enter government, potentially as the largest party.
Belarus	Legislative	25 February	Ahead of the presidential ballot in 2025, could provide an outlet to public anger, four years after the 2020-21 massive protests against the despotic government of Alexander Lukashenko.
EU Parliament	Legislative	6 & 9 June	Could lead to a surge in far-right euroscepticism and redefining the balance of power within the Parliament.
Iran	Legislative	1 March	Could be subject to potential protest as they are the first to be held after widespread anti-government protests in 2022 following the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini at the hands of the Guidance Patrol, the country's morality police. The widespread disqualification of candidates and subsequent potentially low turnout might further fuel frustration.
Mexico	Presidential	2 June	Against a backdrop of increased violence and crime, much of it linked to drug cartels, might increase tensions at the Northern Border and further upset the relationship with Washington.
Moldova	Presidential	November tbc	Under threat from neighboring Russia, plagued by Transnistria's secessionism, Moldova, so far, has managed to escape the contagion of the conflict in Ukraine. The election will provide an opportunity to measure the country's European anchoring, after the European Council decided, on 14 Dec. 2023, to open accession negotiations.
Senegal	Presidential	25 February	Long an outlier to the region's anti-democratic trends, the country recently experienced stiffening of the authorities and, in 2021, widespread riots over the imprisonment of opposition leader Ousmane Sonko for "corruption of youth" and "undermining state security".
South Africa	Legislative	May tbc	Since 1994, the African National Congress (ANC) has held uninterrupted power, but might fall short of the 50 percent needed to win this year. This might test the non-aligned conviction of the BRICS founding member, one of Africa's biggest economies, which has recently taken on a distinctly anti-Western tone.
Tunisia	Presidential	Autumn tbc	Herald of the "Arab Spring", the country moved, under the rule of President Saied, from a hybrid presidential-parliamentary to a suprapresidential system with nearly unchecked executive authority. Possible irregularities and protests will be put under the microscope by the EU which signed a "migrant deal" with Tunisia on 16 July 2023.
United Kingdom	Legislative	Fourth quarter tbc	Perhaps the most significant election in Europe in 2024. Since 2019, three prime ministers have held office in the UK, with the last one, Rishi Sunak, taking office only about a year ago. After fourteen years in the wilderness the Labour Party is set to return to power.

³ We exclude from this list the U.S. presidential election, as well as Taiwan's presidential *elections* already held on 13 January.

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