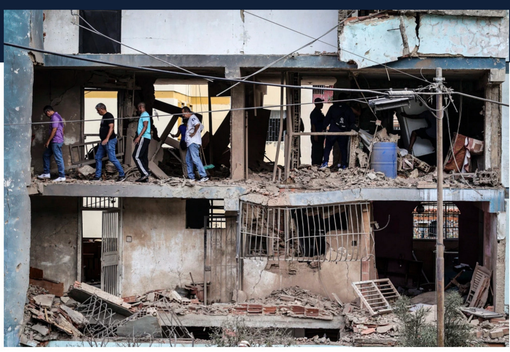
# A mysterious online gambler made $400,000 betting on the removal of Maduro

The trades underscore fears that prediction markets can be used to profit from classified intelligence.



People try to remove their belongings Sunday from their homes in an apartment building in the Soublette neighborhood of La Guaira, Venezuela. Residents say the building was damaged during U.S. military operations. Jesus Vargas / Getty Images

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A mysterious online bettor made more than $400,000 on Polymarket, a website that lets people wager cryptocurrency on the odds of real-world events occurring, by correctly predicting the U.S. would invade Venezuela and topple President Nicolás Maduro.

The bets, which are viewable on Polymarket's website, have prompted fresh concern that the rise of Polymarket and other platforms like it can allow insiders privy to confidential or even classified information to easily use their knowledge to profit.

In the early hours of Saturday, the U.S. military conducted a special operation to capture Maduro and his wife and bring them to the U.S. to face narco-terrorism charges.

Polymarket does not facilitate contact among users. The account in question has made only 13 bets, totalling $33,934.34. All of them were placed between Dec. 27 and Jan. 3 and were related to the probability of the U.S. soon invading Venezuela and of Maduro being removed from office. It's unclear when and where the account was created. Polymarket did not respond to a request for comment.

President Trump claimed earlier in December that Maduro's days were "numbered," but had generally refrained from publicly offering specifics about an operation to remove Maduro. U.S. officials told NBC News that Trump decided before Christmas to authorize the operation in Venezuela, but kept the actual day in flux. The timing wasn't widely known at the Pentagon until late Friday night, the officials said. That night, before the news was public, the Polymarket user placed their largest and final bets, wagering more than $14,000.

The identity of the bettor, their location and whether they were a direct or indirect recipient of knowledge of a pending classified U.S. military operation – or simply extraordinarily and improbably lucky – is unknown.

But it does not appear that they have tried to hide their tracks, said a spokesperson for Chainalysis, a company that tracks and analyzes cryptocurrency transactions, most of which are public. The person has already cashed out their Polymarket winnings in Solana, a type of cryptocurrency, through a major American exchange, with no indication they have tried to hide or launder the funds, the Chainalysis spokesperson said. If any regulators or law enforcement went looking for the bettor, they'd likely have little difficulty locating them.

At least four other Polymarket accounts seen by NBC News made bets only in connection with Maduro being out of office by the end of January, though theirs were comparatively smaller. All these bets were placed between Thursday and Saturday for between $700 and $900, and they made between $7,000 and $14,000. It was not possible to determine if those people had inside information or simply guessed correctly.

The rapid proliferation of prediction markets has created a betting market for just about anything, whether it be mundane, consequential or miraculous.

There's money to be made for predicting whether entrepreneur and reality television star Kim Kardashian will pass the bar exam, whether a nuclear weapon will detonate this year or whether the Second Coming of Jesus Christ will occur within the next 12 months.

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But that massive scope of prediction markets, and the open-source way that companies adjudicate the results, leaves the door open for potential manipulation.

Take one example concerning the war between Russia and Ukraine. Polymarket users are able to bet on which country's army will control certain cities, all laid out in a map kept current by an independent think tank, the Institute for the Study of War. Bettors who predicted Russia would capture the city of Myrnohrad by Nov. 15 were paid out when the market resolved to "yes," citing that think tank map. But days later, the institute said in a statement that "an unauthorized and unapproved edit to the interactive map of Russia's invasion of Ukraine was made on the night of November 15-16 EST." Last month, 404 Media reported that the edit briefly showed Russia capturing Myrnohrad before it disappeared.

Betting platforms also have dozens of political markets, where users can wager on the winners and losers of individual races across the country, both primary and general elections.

There have been controversial instances of D.C. insiders betting on politics, most notably Sean McElwee, formerly of the progressive data firm Data for Progress. McElwee left the firm in 2022, in the aftermath of that year's midterm elections and the indictment of a key ally, billionaire and political megadonor Sam Bankman-Fried, for fraud related to the FTX cryptocurrency exchange he ran. A 2023 Washington Post book excerpt detailed how McElwee had bet thousands of dollars on races his firm was working on, including telling the book's author he commissioned some polls "mostly" to get more information to inform his betting.

Prediction markets currently operate in a legally murky area, having once faced restrictions and scrutiny that have loosened, in part, under the Trump administration. Polymarket previously banned Americans from the platform, based on rules from the Commodity Futures Trading Commission (CFTC), a federal agency that regulates U.S. derivatives markets.

This summer, the CFTC told Polymarket it was dropping a probe into the company and on Nov. 25, Polymarket said that the CFTC had approved it to operate as a U.S. exchange. New users are still prompted to check a box saying they are not a U.S. person or located in the U.S. to create an account, but Polymarket has begun rolling out options for Americans to bet.

Congressman Ritchie Torres, D-N.Y., plans to introduce legislation tackling the topic later this week. Called the Public Integrity in Financial Prediction Markets Act of 2026, the bill looks to explicitly criminalize the act of capitalizing on nonpublic information on such sites, a spokesperson for his office said.

David Chase, a former Securities and Exchange Commission attorney who now works as a securities defense attorney, told NBC News that using inside information to gain a financial edge in commodities trading is generally considered fraud, but that legal precedent has been slow to tackle the legality of betting on such information.

"I think that the courts are going to have to catch up to this, as they typically do," Chase said.

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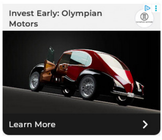
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