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Published Oct. 20, 2024 Updated Oct. 21, 2024

Elon Musk’s influence over the federal government is extraordinary, and extraordinarily lucrative.

Mr. Musk’s rocket company, SpaceX, effectively dictates NASA’s rocket launch schedule. The Defense Department relies on him to get most of its satellites to orbit. His companies were promised \$3 billion across nearly 100 different contracts last year with 17 federal agencies.

FEDERAL CONTRACTS

Two of Elon Musk’s companies account for at least \$15.4 billion in government contracts over the past decade.

TESLA

At least
\$352,000
in contracts

*Federal
contracts*

CABINET DEPARTMENTS

	Energy \$7,000
	State \$440,000
	Commerce \$1.9 million
	Veterans Affairs \$463,000
	Interior \$138,000
	Homeland Security \$359,000
	Agriculture \$120,000
	Transportation \$21,000
	Defense \$3.6 billion

SPACEX

At least
\$15.4 billion
in contracts

INDEPENDENT AGENCIES

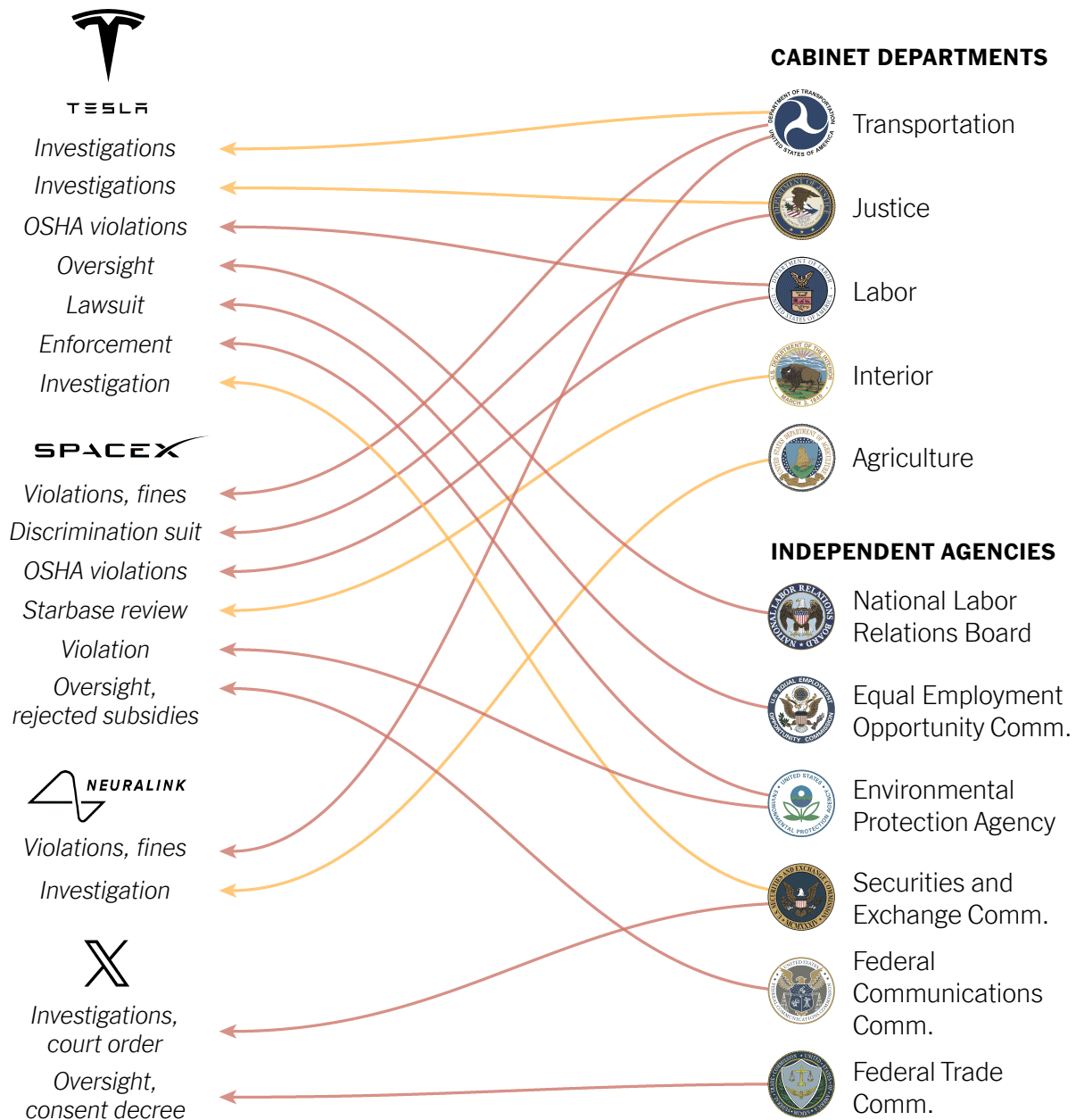
	General Services Administration \$352,000
	Environmental Protection Agency \$30,000
	NASA \$11.8 billion

By Jonathan Corum

His entanglements with federal regulators are also numerous and adversarial. His companies have been targeted in at least 20 recent investigations or reviews, including over the safety of his Tesla cars and the environmental damage caused by his rockets.

INVESTIGATION AND OVERSIGHT

Mr. Musk's companies are increasingly facing **regulatory battles** and overlapping federal investigations from all corners of the government.



By Jonathan Corum

Given Mr. Musk’s immense business footprint, he will be a major player no matter who wins the election.

But he has thrown his fortune and power behind former President Donald J. Trump and, in return, Mr. Trump has vowed to make Mr. Musk head of a new “government efficiency commission” with the power to recommend wide-ranging cuts at federal agencies and changes to federal rules.

That would essentially give the world’s richest man and a major government contractor the power to regulate the regulators who hold sway over his companies, amounting to a potentially enormous conflict of interest.

Through a review of court filings, regulatory dockets and government contracting data, The New York Times has compiled an accounting of Mr. Musk's multipronged business arrangements with the federal government, as well as the violations, fines, consent decrees and other inquiries federal agencies have ordered against his companies. Together, they show a deep web of relationships: Instead of entering this new role as a neutral observer, Mr. Musk would be passing judgment on his own customers and regulators.

Already, Mr. Musk has discussed how he would use the new position to help his own companies.

He has questioned a rule that required SpaceX to obtain a permit for discharging large amounts of potentially polluted water from its launchpad in Texas. He also said that limiting this kind of oversight could help SpaceX reach Mars sooner — “so long as it is not smothered by bureaucracy,” he wrote on X, his social-media platform. “The Department of Government Efficiency is the only path to extending life beyond Earth.”

Earlier this month, he attacked the Federal Communications Commission, which oversees the internet satellites that SpaceX launches. He suggested on X that if the commission hadn't “illegally revoked” more than \$886 million worth of federal funding the company had sought to deliver internet access to rural areas, satellite kits would “probably have saved lives in North Carolina” after a hurricane devastated parts of the state.

A spokesman for the commission said it didn't award the money because the company was proposing to provide services in some areas that weren't actually rural, including the Newark Liberty International Airport.

Mr. Musk and SpaceX did not respond to requests for comment for this article. Brian Hughes, a spokesman for Mr. Trump, declined to directly address questions about the potential for a conflict of interest, if Mr. Musk takes on this new role.

“Elon Musk is a genius, an innovator, and has literally made history by building creative, modern and efficient systems,” Mr. Hughes said in a statement.

Regardless of who is elected president, the deep ties between Mr. Musk and the U.S. government are unlikely to change anytime soon, with agencies becoming increasingly reliant on the vehicles, rockets, internet and other services his companies provide.

What he delivers to the U.S. government is sprawling, according to federal contract data:

ROCKETS, CARS AND SATELLITES

Some examples of the services that Mr. Musk's companies provide to the U.S. government.

\$2.2 billion

- Energy
- State
- Commerce
- Veterans Affairs
- Interior
- Homeland Security
- Agriculture
- Transportation
- Defense
- G.S.A.
- E.P.A.
- NASA

SpaceX was hired to design, build and test a space landing

system for astronauts.

SpaceX sold Starlink satellite internet to the U.S. embassy in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan, providing access to U.S. officials in a

country that severely censors online activity.

Tesla provided a tactical vehicle to the U.S. embassy in Iceland.

And the U.S. Forestry Service used **Starlinks** to connect emergency responders battling wildfires in remote parts of

California.

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The idea for an efficiency commission originated with Mr. Musk. When he interviewed Mr. Trump on X in August, Mr. Musk brought it up three times — returning to the topic when Mr. Trump digressed into other subjects.

“I think it would be great to just have a government efficiency commission that takes a look at these things and just ensures that the taxpayer money — the taxpayers’ hard-earned money — is spent in a good way,” Mr. Musk said the third

time. “And I’d be happy to help out on such a commission.”

“I’d love it,” Mr. Trump finally replied. “Well, you, you’re the greatest cutter.”

Maya MacGuineas, president of the nonpartisan Committee for a Responsible Federal Budget, applauded the idea of an efficiency commission, and said that Mr. Musk’s experience in business could be good preparation to lead it.

She said Mr. Musk’s formal power would most likely be limited. Previous presidents, going back to Theodore Roosevelt, have tried using committees of business-minded outsiders to rethink government. For their ideas to become law, Congress has to agree. Usually, she said, it does not.

But a suggestion from Mr. Musk could still be damaging to an agency, if he singled it out to Mr. Trump as an example of waste or mismanagement.

Legal experts who have studied federal ethics rules and the use of outside business executives as government advisers said Mr. Musk’s interactions with the federal government are so broad it might not be possible for him to serve as a prominent adviser to the president without creating major conflicts of interest.

Mr. Musk “has had very contentious interactions and entanglements with regulators,” said Kathleen Clark, an ethics lawyer who has served as an adviser to the District of Columbia Attorney General’s office. “It is entirely reasonable to believe that what he would bring to this federal audit is his own set of biases and grudges and financial interests.”

Mr. Musk and his companies often question federal regulations — particularly when they threaten to slow plans to further expand his operations.

One such example was the test launch this month of Starship, SpaceX’s newest rocket. NASA has agreed to pay the company as much as \$4.4 billion to take astronauts to the surface of the moon on two future missions — although the dates will depend on when all the equipment is ready. So far, Starship has not flown any humans.

But the Federal Aviation Administration held up this most recent test launch for weeks, in part because of questions about harm SpaceX has caused to wildlife near its Texas launch site, a delay that infuriated Mr. Musk.

“We continue to be stuck in a reality where it takes longer to do the government paperwork to license a rocket launch than it does to design and build the actual hardware,” SpaceX said in a statement.

Last month, the F.A.A. started the process to fine SpaceX \$633,009 for disregarding license requirements related to two of its Florida launches last year that may have compromised safety, the agency said.

This was a shift for the F.A.A., which in past instances had not imposed fines when SpaceX ignored the agency’s direct orders. Marc Nichols, the F.A.A.’s chief counsel, said in a statement last month that “failure of a company to comply with the safety requirements will result in consequences.”

Mr. Musk responded on his social media site: “SpaceX will be filing suit against the FAA for regulatory overreach.” The company followed up with a four-page letter to Congress complaining about the F.A.A. which it said had been “unsuccessful in modernizing and streamlining its regulations.”

The list of clashes by Mr. Musk’s companies extends to many other federal agencies.

FINES AND FIGHTING

Several examples of clashes between U.S. agencies and Mr. Musk’s companies.

CABINET DEPARTMENTS

Transportation

Justice

Labor

Interior

Agriculture

INDEPENDENT AGENCIES

N.L.R.B.

E.E.O.C.

E.P.A.

S.E.C.

F.C.C

F.T.C.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has opened five investigations of Tesla, including for complaints of unexpected braking, loss of steering control and crashes while

cars were in “self-driving” mode.

Tesla has tried to block at least two rulings from the **National Labor Relations Board**, including one punishing Mr. Musk for tweeting that factory workers would lose stock options if they

joined a union.

Neuralink, Mr. Musk's brain-implant company, was fined for violating **Transportation Department** rules regarding the

movement of hazardous materials.

The **Justice Department** sued SpaceX, arguing that the company refused to hire refugees and people granted asylum because of

their citizenship status.

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Mr. Musk in recent years has particularly attacked the Securities and Exchange Commission, which in 2018 charged him with securities fraud for a series of false and misleading tweets related to taking Tesla private. Mr. Musk had posted on Twitter that he had planned to take the company private at \$420 a share, and that he had “funding secured” for a transaction. As part of a later settlement with the S.E.C., he stepped down as Tesla’s chairman and Tesla paid a \$20 million fine.

In a 2022 TED Talk, Mr. Musk lambasted regulators, calling them “bastards.”

Even before getting a formal role in the federal government, Mr. Musk has repeatedly called for a broad effort to strike or weaken federal regulations, and to slash federal spending. “If Trump wins, we do have an opportunity to do kind of a once in a lifetime deregulation and reduction in the size of the government,” Mr. Musk said at a conference in Los Angeles last month.

If Mr. Musk were to get a senior advisory role in a Trump administration, regulators might have to consider how taking action against one of Mr. Musk’s companies might affect their budget or regulatory authority, even if he did not directly push those agencies to back down, Ms. Clark said.

The federal government has rules intended to prevent such conflicts. There are 1,019 advisory committees with more than 60,000 members, opining on everything from how pesticides are used on farms to how wild horses in the United States are managed. But these committees each have very narrow jurisdiction, compared to a governmentwide “efficiency” review that Mr. Musk would lead.

Another criminal law prohibits federal employees and outside advisers who are sometimes considered “special government employees” from “participating personally and substantially in any particular matter that affects your financial interests, as well as the financial interests of your spouse, minor child, general partner, an organization in which you serve as an officer.”

But that has often not prevented problems with outside advisers — even those with much less complicated portfolios than Mr. Musk’s. Pharmaceutical industry advisers to the Food and Drug Administration, various studies have shown, often appear to have made recommendations that benefit their corporate interests, as have military contractors tapped to advise the Pentagon.

Mr. Musk has hinted at one government efficiency he would like to see: killing NASA’s Starliner contract with Boeing, his main industry competitor.

“The world doesn’t need another capsule,” he wrote earlier this year, referring to the long-delayed Boeing system, which returned empty this month, after encountering trouble on its first human test flight. (He has not addressed if the proposed efficiency committee would take this up.)

Mr. Trump has previously faced accusations that he created conflicts when he named certain business executives as advisers.

That included his appointment of Carl Icahn, the billionaire investor, as a special adviser on regulatory matters in 2017, even as Mr. Icahn was lobbying federal regulators to revamp a rule that would allow a Texas oil refinery he partly owned to save hundreds of millions of dollars. Mr. Icahn ended up stepping down from the unpaid role only months after he was appointed, after broad criticism of the arrangement.

Richard Briffault, a Columbia University professor of law who has served as chair of the New York City Conflicts of Interest Board, said that there might be an advantage to having Mr. Musk as a formal adviser to Mr. Trump — because that would at least require some disclosure of the advice he was offering.

“Having this in public as opposed to having Elon Musk calling up the White House and saying, ‘Hey, this agency is coming down hard on me. Get them to back off,’ — is that even worse?” Mr. Briffault said. “It’s an open question.”

Methodology

The New York Times analyzed transaction-level contract and grant data from [usaspending.gov](https://www.usaspending.gov) between the 2013 and 2023 fiscal years, calculating total obligated dollars by funding agency for businesses founded by Elon Musk. The Times consulted experts at The Pulse, a federal research and advisory firm, and the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a Washington think tank, to review the methodology.

Kitty Bennett contributed research.

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A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Musk the Contractor vs. Musk the U.S. Adviser