


## *Between Attacks on Electric Cars, Trump Says They're 'Incredible'*

The former president's comments on E.V.s have shifted since he has grown more friendly with Elon Musk, the billionaire head of Tesla.

 Listen to this article · 9:57 min [Learn more](#)



By Lisa Friedman

July 23, 2024

**Sign up for the On Politics newsletter.** Your guide to the 2024 elections.  
[Get it sent to your inbox.](#)

Former President Donald J. Trump has spent years ridiculing electric vehicles, saying they don't go far, are too expensive and are made in China. He has promised to end federal support for electric vehicles, a central feature of President Biden's strategy to cut the carbon dioxide that is heating the planet.

But in recent months, Mr. Trump has been saying some nice things about E.V.s. While he still throws some shade on electric vehicles, in the same breath he also tells crowds that he likes them.

On Saturday, he went further, telling a rally in Grand Rapids, Mich., "I'm constantly talking about electric vehicles but I don't mean I'm against them. I'm totally for them." Moments later he said, "I've driven them and they are incredible, but they're not for everybody."

This subtle softening began after Mr. Trump met in March with Elon Musk, the billionaire chief executive of Tesla, in Palm Beach, Fla. The two men began frequent discussions on a range of topics, including conversations about electric vehicles, according to comments Mr. Musk made last month at a shareholders meeting. "He just called me out of the blue," Mr. Musk said. "I don't know why, but he does."

As spring turned to summer, Mr. Trump shifted his attacks from the reliability and value of electric vehicles to the federal incentives for consumers to buy E.V.s, and to environmental regulations designed to prod automakers to step up production. He's said that anyone who wants to buy an electric vehicle should be able to but the government should not shape the car market.

Asked at the Tesla shareholders meeting in June about Mr. Trump's apparent turn, Mr. Musk replied, "I can be persuasive," according to an audio recording.

"A lot of his friends now have Teslas and they all love it," Mr. Musk said. "And he's a huge fan of the Cybertruck. So I think those may be contributing factors."

In fact, The Washington Post reported in 2015 that Mr. Trump's fleet of personal vehicles included a Tesla. And as president, Mr. Trump once held an event at the White House to promote an electric pickup truck made by Lordstown Motors, which later went bankrupt. But after he lost the 2020 election and President Biden began a concerted push for electric vehicles, Mr. Trump began attacking them.

Neither Mr. Trump nor Mr. Musk responded to a request for comment.

Both men stand to benefit from their new alliance.

For Mr. Trump, the enthusiastic backing of Mr. Musk, one of the world's wealthiest men and a near mythical figure among Republicans, would be helpful. "The one thing connected to E.V.s that Republicans like, is they like Elon," said Mike Murphy, a veteran Republican consultant who promotes electric vehicles.

"Elon Musk, I love Elon Musk," Mr. Trump told the crowd on Saturday. "Do we love him? I love him."

For Mr. Musk, the elimination of the \$7,500 federal tax credit for buyers of electric vehicles could hurt GM, Ford and other Tesla competitors. The 2022 Inflation Reduction Act provides tax credits of up to \$7,500 for buyers of electric vehicles, but some Tesla models do not qualify because of several requirements, including that the vehicles be free of Chinese-made components.

"Take away the subsidies," Mr. Musk wrote on X this month. "It will only help Tesla."

Tesla, which has had an enormous head start in production and already has a network of charging stations, may be more likely to remain profitable without subsidies than legacy automakers like GM or Ford, analysts have said.



President Biden test drove an E.V. during a 2021 visit to a General Motors plant in Detroit that included the company chief executive, Mary Barra, second from right. Doug Mills/The New York Times

Mr. Musk was once a sharp critic of Mr. Trump, resigning from two advisory councils during Mr. Trump's presidency over his decision to pull the United States out of the Paris climate agreement. But within a half-hour of the July 13 assassination attempt against Mr. Trump, Mr. Musk endorsed his campaign to return to the White House.

"Elon endorsed me the other day," Mr. Trump said at the Saturday rally, adding that Mr. Musk has pledged to donate \$45 million a month to his campaign. "Not \$45 million — \$45 million a month!"

Despite the Biden administration's support for electric vehicles, Mr. Musk has felt slighted since 2021, when Tesla was not invited to a White House meeting on E.V.s. He has bristled at the administration's support for Detroit's unionized automakers, taking offense when Mr. Biden posted a video on X in January 2022 in which he was speaking with Mary Barra, the chairwoman and chief executive of General Motors. "I meant it when I said the future was going to be made right here in America," Mr. Biden wrote. "Companies like GM and Ford are building more electric vehicles here at home than ever before."

Four months later, Mr. Musk was still stewing. "This administration has done everything it can to sideline & ignore Tesla, even though we have made twice as many E.V.s as rest of U.S. industry combined," Mr. Musk wrote.

The future of electric vehicles and the course of the clean energy transition in America could be altered by the 2024 election. Mr. Trump, who has dismissed climate change as a hoax, wants to expand oil and gas drilling. Mr. Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris consider climate change an urgent threat and want to move the country away from fossil fuels and toward clean energy.

In response to the Biden administration's policies, American automakers have invested billions to create the capacity to produce electric vehicles, which made up 6.8 percent of new vehicle sales in the United States in May, according to Edmunds, a company that reviews cars and tracks the auto market. In the global market, American automakers are facing stiff competition from BYD, China's leading auto company, which has been heavily subsidized by the Chinese government and churns out inexpensive cars that have flooded China and are beginning to sell in Europe.

"Any auto C.E.O. will tell you electric vehicles are going to save the automobile industry so the Chinese don't dominate it," Mr. Murphy said. "But in Trump's mind, he identifies investments in electric vehicles with Biden policy, so it's wrong and has to be attacked."

There is a clear partisan split in public opinion when it comes to electric vehicles. In a Pew Research Center survey in June, 77 percent of Republicans said they would not consider purchasing an electric vehicle for their next car and only 13 percent reported being "very interested" in an E.V. That's compared with 45 percent of Democrats who said they would be "very interested" in making their next car an electric one.

"Trump is tapping into something Republicans really believe," said Whit Ayres, a Republican political consultant. "They're far less likely to consider buying an electric vehicle and they really resent the idea that the government is going to come along and subsidize these Democrats who want to buy an electric vehicle."



Mr. Musk, second from left, and other business leaders during a White House visit in 2017. Doug Mills/The New York Times

Mr. Trump insists that the American car market will never be completely electric. “You can’t have 100 percent of your cars electric,” he told the crowd in Michigan on Saturday. “We can’t electrify our cities.”

He repeated a familiar promise to end the “electric vehicle mandate on Day 1,” a phrase he uses to refer to Biden administration limits on automobile tailpipe emissions. It is designed to ensure that the majority, not 100 percent, of new passenger cars and light trucks sold in the U.S. are all-electric or hybrids by 2032. It does not ban the sales of gasoline-powered cars and trucks.

As the Inflation Reduction Act was making its way through Congress in 2021, Mr. Musk argued that it should be abandoned. He said government spending levels were “insane.”

“We don’t need the \$7,500 tax credit,” Mr. Musk said at a Wall Street Journal conference. “I would say, honestly, I would say I would just can this whole bill. Don’t pass it.” He also dismissed federal money to build electric vehicle charging stations, saying “Do we need to support the gas stations? We don’t.”

Tesla has benefited greatly from government money in the past. The company received a \$465 million loan guarantee from the Department of Energy that allowed it to produce specially designed, all-electric plug-in vehicles and build a facility in California to make

battery packs, electric motors and other components. It repaid the loan in 2013.

Mr. Musk seems unbothered by Mr. Trump's declaration that he would end policies designed to get more people to buy electric vehicles. "It'll be fine," Mr. Musk wrote on his social media platform, X.

But Mr. Trump and his allies have promoted other policies that could hurt Tesla.

For example, Project 2025, a blueprint for a next Republican administration written by more than 100 of Mr. Trump's former aides, calls for revoking California's ability to set its own emissions standards. That ability, under a waiver of the Clean Air Act, has underpinned California's goal of selling only zero-emissions vehicles by 2035, making Tesla a major player in that market.

Conservatives said they believed that Mr. Musk had little to worry about from a second Trump administration.

"I just don't see the downside risk from a business perspective for Musk," said James Pethokoukis, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, a right-leaning research organization in Washington.

"Does it seem likely that actions by the Trump administration will undercut the only American company that's successful at manufacturing these cars, employs about 150,000 people and is based in Texas, and, oh yeah, whose owner is now a massive donor to the Republican Party and supports President Trump?" Mr. Pethokoukis asked.

**Lisa Friedman** is a Times reporter who writes about how governments are addressing climate change and the effects of those policies on communities. More about Lisa Friedman