

As Musk tears through Washington, Tesla owners feel buyer's remorse

Story by Tobi Raji, Joe Heim

About 10 years ago, Tom Blackburn became one of the first 100,000 people to buy a Tesla Model S. The purchase was part of a broader effort to adopt a more environmentally-conscious lifestyle, which also included installing solar panels on his Virginia home.

Now, the 76-year-old is worried about the message his car might send to others: that he supports Tesla Motors CEO Elon Musk, who has embraced right-wing politics, boosted antisemitic conspiracy theories on his personal X account, and become a central figure of President Donald Trump's administration. As a small act of protest, Blackburn purchased a bumper sticker that reads, "I bought this before I knew he was crazy."

Marylander Carla Harne, 41, has watched the tide turn against Tesla and Musk from the front seat of her sleek, fiery red Model 3. Harne's interactions with others over her car had mostly been positive — until last year, when, hours after Trump was elected president of the United States, someone threw "probably a dozen" eggs at her car as she drove home from work.

"My windshield was just covered," Harne said.

Andrew Loewinger of Northwest D.C. sold his Model S in November to protest Musk and his "abhorrent politics and actions."

"After I sold the car, I got a customer satisfaction survey from them, and what I wrote, which I still believe, is that Musk has irretrievably damaged the brand, and I would not associate with that brand again, period," Loewinger, 71, said.

Across the decidedly Blue Washington region, some Tesla owners — once seen as part of a pioneering sustainability movement — are grappling with the CEO's emergence as one of the most powerful right-wing political figures in the

country. Musk, the world's richest person, spent at least \$288 million to help elect Trump and other Republican candidates, making him the 2024 presidential election's biggest donor.

Now, as head of the newly created DOGE, or the Department of Government Efficiency, Musk has raced to execute his vision of a dramatically smaller government, wiping out swaths of the federal workforce, slashing diversity and inclusion efforts and ripping up deals with government contractors. The broad-brush bludgeoning of federal agencies and programs has been cheered by MAGA's base, but it has also run in to a flurry of lawsuits and legal challenges seeking to halt what critics view as an unconstitutional process. Even some of Trump's senior advisers have been surprised and frustrated by DOGE's seeming freedom to do anything it wants, according to Washington Post reporting last week.

Musk's actions are distinctly felt here in the Washington metropolitan region, where about 20 percent of the federal workforce call the area home. Protests against DOGE have taken place almost weekly and Tesla showrooms have also been picketed, including ones in Georgetown, Arlington and Owings Mills, Maryland. At one of the demonstrations in Georgetown earlier this month, protesters carried signs that read, "No one voted for the Muskrat" and "Musk Robbing America." A message scrawled in colorful chalk on the sidewalk surrounding the dealership read: "You want a swastica?"

For some Washington residents, the political baggage associated with owning a Tesla has become too great.

"It just irritates me very deeply that the man who started the Tesla and has done other good things has, in my opinion, completely gone off the rails," Blackburn said. "I would never buy another Tesla. I have a brother who bought a Tesla at my urging and a really good friend who bought a Tesla at my urging. Neither of them will ever buy a Tesla again."

The brand vs. the CEO

Jessica Caldwell, an industry analyst with automotive website Edmunds.com, said Tesla owners fall into two camps: those who say they will never buy a Tesla again and those who differentiate between Musk and Tesla.

“The one camp is, ‘I really like my Tesla. I don’t necessarily agree with him, but I kind of see them as two separate entities. It’s not as if Elon Musk is in my car,’” Caldwell said.

Chris Terrell, an electric vehicle enthusiast from Chesterfield, Virginia, falls into that camp.

Terrell, 58, had always wanted to own an electric vehicle but thought they were too expensive. But as the supply of pre-owned electric vehicles increased, they became more affordable.

Terrell purchased his first electric vehicle — a 2023 Chevy Bolt EUV — in May for \$20,800. In September, Terrell and his wife bought their second electric vehicle — a 2021 Tesla Model 3 for \$22,000, taking advantage of the Biden-era used clean vehicle credit.

Terrell loves his Tesla. “It’s a magnificent piece of machinery,” he said.

Terrell, who describes himself as a center-left Democrat who rarely votes Republican, encouraged other Tesla owners to separate the business from the CEO. “Tesla has 120,000 employees. They build great cars,” he said. “Musk is a problem, not Tesla.”

Protesters gather in opposition to Tesla Motors CEO Elon Musk’s alliance with President Donald Trump, at the automaker’s showroom in the South Lake Union neighborhood of Seattle on Thursday. (Daniel Berman for The Washington Post)

“I’d love to see Musk step down as the CEO, and if Musk stepped down tomorrow, the anti-Tesla sentiment disappears overnight,” Terrell added.

Luis Garay of Silver Spring, Maryland, who owns a Tesla X and a Cybertruck, likened the tension over Tesla Motors and Musk to the tension between a husband, his

wife and his brother-in-law — just because you don't get along with your brother-in-law doesn't mean you should hate your wife. "Separate that," he said.

Several Tesla owners at a Tesla charging station in northeast Washington earlier this month declined to give their names but said that politics didn't affect how they felt about their cars and didn't see ownership of them as making a statement one way or another.

Still the dominant EV

While other electric car manufacturers have gained ground in recent years, Tesla continues to dominate the U.S. market, including the Washington region.

A little more than half of the 9,045 electric-only vehicles registered in D.C. are Teslas, according to a D.C. Dept. of Motor Vehicles spokesperson, by far the leading electric vehicle brand in the city. In Maryland, there are 54,290 Teslas registered, making up about 42 percent of the state's 129,000 registered electric and hybrid vehicles as of Jan. 31, according to Maryland's transportation department. As of 2024, Virginia has almost 92,000 electric cars registered, according to the Virginia DMV, though the commonwealth does not track electric vehicles by manufacturer.

Last year Tesla experienced its first annual drop in electric vehicle deliveries in more than a decade. Overall sales in 2024 declined a little over 1 percent as the company delivered about 1.78 million vehicles compared to approximately 1.8 million in 2023. Last January, Musk said Tesla would experience a "notably slower growth rate" as the company invested in next-generation vehicles it plans to start building in 2025.

Some Tesla employees and investors have expressed concerns that Musk has tarnished the company's brand, with some indicating that the company would be better off if Musk resigned, The Post reported earlier this month. Tesla's stock surged following the election and peaked in mid-December at \$479.86 a share. Since then it has declined steadily, dropping below \$333 per share Monday afternoon.

Spokespeople for Tesla did not respond to a Washington Post email for this story asking if the company believes sales have been impacted by Musk's role in the new administration and if Tesla owners in the region had reported being targeted because of their vehicles.

Musk has so far shrugged off the critics. Asked during an earnings call in January if his actions were negatively affecting Tesla, he pointed to his 127 million followers on X, his social media platform. "I might not be popular with some people but for the vast majority of people, my follower count speaks for itself," he said.

An anti-Elon Musk sticker on a Tesla at a charging station in Berlin, on Feb. 10. © Tobias Schwarz/AFP/Getty Images

But more Americans disapprove of Musk than approve of him, according to a Washington Post-Ipsos poll released Thursday. Just 34 percent of American adults say they approve of the job Musk is doing within the federal government. A whopping 85 percent of Democrats disapprove of his new role.

The 'Anti Elon Tesla Club'

For Matthew Hiller, the backlash against Musk has been a bonanza for his side business. On Etsy, he sells bumper stickers and magnets aimed at Tesla owners who want people to know they don't support Musk.

Hiller, who lives in Honolulu, said he's been receiving hundreds of orders every day for stickers with messages like "I bought this before I knew Elon was crazy."

Another, "Anti Elon Tesla club" has also taken off. "I think it creates a sense of community," Hiller said. "Like, I'm in this little club with all of the other Tesla owners who can't stand him."

Sales of the stickers had been strong since the election, but after Musk gave a gesture widely interpreted as a Nazi salute at Trump's inaugural rally on Jan. 20, the numbers skyrocketed, averaging 400 to 500 orders a day.

"It went crazy. I had to get friends to help me pack envelopes," Hiller said. "That particular incident just opened the eyes of more people."

Jillian Rebraca, 33, has purchased two stickers from Hiller. Rebraca and her husband were at one time the proud owners of a gray 2022 Tesla Model 3.

Jillian Rebraca stands by her Tesla in Washington, on Feb. 24. © Robb Hill/for The Washington Post

The District residents still own the car. They're just no longer proud of it. Musk, Rebraca says, ruined it for them.

The couple bought the Tesla because they wanted an electric car that was good for the environment, comfortable and stylish. It ticked all the boxes. What they hadn't anticipated was Musk actively campaigning for Trump's second presidential bid and becoming a dominant figure in his new administration.

Rebraca said she and her husband started feeling buyer's remorse about the car during the campaign. As a Christmas novelty gift, Rebraca went online and bought her husband an "Anti-Elon Tesla Club" sticker. But it wasn't until Musk gave his salute that they put the sticker on their car.

Rebraca and her husband put a anti-Elon Musk magnet on the back of their car. © Robb Hill/for The Washington Post

"The person who owns this company is, I'm trying to be diplomatic here, polarizing," Rebraca said. "With the car being the political statement that it is I wanted to sell it but that's not really feasible right now."

For Rebraca, buying another Tesla in the future is out of the question.

"Absolutely not," she said. "The cars could be free and I would choose to walk."

Faiz Siddiqui, Emily Guskin and Scott Clement contributed to this report.