



Graffiti and middle fingers: Tesla Cybertrucks have become a political statement

EVs have long been championed by people who care about climate change. But the Cybertruck is part of a new crop of EVs aimed at a different driver.

Trevor Hughes

USA TODAY

Rodney Best has driven Cadillacs, BMWs and Corvettes, but it's his new Tesla Cybertruck that gets all the attention – and the occasional middle finger.

Best doesn't see his Cybertruck as a political statement, although he is a fan of Tesla and its increasingly political leader, Elon Musk.

But he's among many Cybertruck owners who have felt attacked for their vehicle choice. While not everyone sees Tesla ownership as political, there's a growing trend of people who do.

Online, Cybertruck social media groups are filled with examples of drivers being harassed, yelled at or targeted for their vehicle of choice. And news reports nationally show multiple dealerships have been targeted by anti-Musk vandals.

On Friday, federal agents announced they were investigating vandalism at a Tesla dealership in Loveland, Colorado. Someone smashed windows, painted Cybertruck windshields with large red Xs and tried to start a fire. Local media reported that someone also painted "Nazi Cars" at the dealership about an hour northwest of Denver, which said it was the third attack of its kind this year.

The vandalism is happening as the world's richest man and the Cybertruck have rapidly taken on a new political significance in America.

After decades of pushing Americans to drive electric cars, including Tesla sedans, some liberals have soured on Musk's company. And statistics show that Cybertruck registrations have been surging in conservative states like Texas and Florida, according to data compiled by S&P Global Mobility.

In Musk's marketing, the Cybertruck aims to be everything many early EVs were not: Big, boxy and rugged, with lots of power. While most EVs seemed designed for a smaller, smoother future, the Cybertruck appears poised to help its owners survive a coming apocalypse in style and comfort.

It's equipped with the towing capacity to haul a 30-foot boat and bullet-resistant stainless steel body – the kind of marketing it takes to sell a red-state EV.

"Drive it and you'll never go back. Until you drive it, you'll never know," said Best, 71, from the front seat as the truck drove him around St. Petersburg, Florida. "It just makes sense to me, the fact that it's Elon Musk designing it, because he's so smart, and it's got all these safety features."



EVs have been polarizing for years

The battles over Musk's vehicles are the latest salvo in the controversial history of battery-powered electric vehicles, which have become a polarizing presence in the United States.

A 2024 study by auto industry analytics firm AutoPacific found that more than half of battery EV drivers identify as Democrats, compared with 30% Republican. AutoPacific also singled out Musk's political activity as a possible driver of EV adoption among conservatives.

"Our analyses of EV owners over the years have clearly shown a correlation between more left-leaning political views and EV early adopters," AutoPacific Director of Marketing and Consumers Insights Deborah Grieb said in announcing the study. "But as EVs continue to expand across brands, vehicle types and price ranges, that association is showing signs of fading."

Tom Libby, an automotive analyst with S&P Global Mobility, said the year-old Cybertrucks have quickly had an outsized impact on the country. With only about 3,000-4,000 registered each month, Cybertrucks remain a niche vehicle, he said.

"It's an extremely unique, extremely polarizing vehicle," he said, noting there are about 35,000 registered nationally. "It's the other end of the spectrum from the Toyota Camry, which is designed to offend nobody at all."

Libby said Cybertruck registrations have slowed in recent months, as have registrations of Teslas overall, while EVs from other manufacturers are starting to gain momentum. Tesla is the single-largest producer of EVs on American roads, with roughly half the market share.

Nationally, there were more than 550,000 Tesla vehicles registered last year, Libby said.



Premium EVs change the game

The first EVs sold in America were small and underpowered, with low-capacity batteries. But expensive EVs like the Cybertruck, Rivian's R1, Ford's F-150 Lightning and GMC's EV Hummer and Sierra are shifting public perception, said Whitney Yates Woods, a car dealership owner in the Phoenix area.

Woods, 38, drives a Hummer EV. She's also tested out the Cybertruck and other EVs. She said her dealerships are seeing more and more buyers consider EVs. Like the Cybertruck, EV Hummers and Sierras sell for around \$100,000.



"At first, it was definitely a status car, athletes and famous people getting them," Woods said. Now, "I don't know that they necessarily come in and want to make a statement. People are like oh, GM makes that? They're surprised at how nice they are. People are just kind of a level of surprised, shocked even that it's an EV. And they might not have ever considered an EV before but now they are."

Woods said being able to offer top-of-the-line vehicles that happen to be EVs seems to have triggered a perception shift among buyers.

"I think they're not expecting it to have all the bells and whistles. These are luxury vehicles. They are our top-of-the-line offerings," she said.

Best, the Florida Cybertruck driver, said luxury and technology are what prompted him to buy his stainless steel truck. He said he loves it can drive him around town using the company's "Full Self-Driving (Supervised)" mode, which uses cameras and other sensors to autonomously navigate without his direct input. It's fast, he said, and powerful.

And whenever Musk and his engineers come up with software that can make the truck better, they can just update it over the Internet.

"I'll never buy a gas engine ever again. Electric motors are just better," Best said. "And Elon Musk, I don't know why anybody would not want to follow someone so smart."

At Trump's White House, Musk's tactics frustrate some senior officials, sources say

Story by Reuters

As tech billionaire Elon Musk expands his influence over more than a dozen U.S. federal agencies, frustration is growing among some top aides to President Donald Trump, who want more coordination from Musk's team as he slashes the U.S. government, according to four people aware of the tensions.

Trump's chief of staff, Susie Wiles, and her team have at times felt out of the loop as Musk's so-called Department of Government Efficiency seeks to fire thousands of federal workers while accessing sensitive data and disrupting operations, the

four people said. Wiles and some of her top aides spoke to Musk recently about the issues, according to one of the sources.

Speaking to reporters at the White House on Tuesday, Musk projected alignment between himself, his tight-knit group of DOGE staffers and Trump. But underlying tensions with some White House officials highlight potential difficulties for Trump in balancing his core team with Musk's DOGE staff as they upend agencies in a sweeping restructuring that has challenged congressional authority and faced a series of lawsuits.

FILE PHOTO: U.S. President-elect Donald Trump walks with Elon Musk before attending a viewing of the launch of the sixth test flight of the SpaceX Starship rocket, in Brownsville, Texas, U.S., November 19, 2024 . Brandon Bell/Pool via REUTERS/File Photo© Thomson Reuters

In the recent conversation, Wiles and her staff delivered a message to Musk: “We need to message all this. We need to be looped in,” according to the source familiar with the encounter. Reuters was not able to determine the specific date they spoke or what, if any, changes Musk made after that conversation. The source added that Trump himself continued to speak positively about Musk to donors and others.

Musk did not respond to a request for comment. The White House declined to comment. An official with knowledge of the matter pushed back at the sources’ description of tensions, saying initial “operational hiccups” had been smoothed out. Musk sends reports to Wiles at the end of each day and they speak by phone almost every day, the official said.

The official added that it was Musk’s idea to speak with reporters on Tuesday at the Oval Office with his four-year-old son, X, by his side. “He showed up with his kid. We rolled with it,” the official said.

On Tuesday, Trump issued an executive order that expanded Musk’s power over the federal bureaucracy, requiring federal agencies to work with DOGE to make large workforce reductions and limit hiring. The order calls for DOGE to station a “team lead” at every government agency who will oversee all hiring decisions.

"This is a unified team," White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt told reporters on Wednesday. "Elon Musk is serving at the pleasure of the president, just like

everybody else on this team. He takes directives directly from the president of the United States."

At the Oval Office news conference, with Trump beside him, Musk defended his role as an unelected official who has been granted unprecedented authority by the Republican president to dismantle parts of the U.S. government. He told reporters he speaks to Trump nearly every day, saying his work is in the interest of the public and democracy.

"The people voted for major government reform, and that's what people are going to get," said Musk. "All of our actions are maximally transparent."

DOGE, however, has operated in deep secrecy. It has provided almost no information on whom it employs, where it is operating or what actions it is taking inside government agencies. It posts little information about its work, providing only dollar figures for purported cuts in specific agencies and little concrete detail. It has stunned federal employees, sending its members into at least 15 agencies and gaining access to sensitive data. As a "special government employee," Musk's financial disclosure filings will not be made public, the White House has said.

One of the four sources said that Wiles was not upset with Musk's efforts to dismantle government agencies and downsize the federal workforce, but rather with his approach. Wiles, one of the two managers of Trump's 2024 election campaign, wants Musk and DOGE to keep her team informed and work in a more orderly fashion, said the source, who has direct knowledge of the matter.

"There is some frustration, but it's overblown to say it's a rift," the source said.

The fourth source, an associate of high-ranking White House officials, described the friction as more serious and said Wiles' subordinates had expressed discomfort over information that Musk released on his social media platform X before it had been vetted by senior White House staff. "They're definitely finding things out on Twitter."

CONCERN OVER EMAILS

One point of contention is a series of emails that Musk associates began sending out to federal employees, including a January 28 message offering two million federal workers financial incentives to quit. Wiles and her team did not sign off on some of those emails, according to one of the four sources and a separate, fifth, source close to Trump.

To be sure, many of Trump's close allies and White House aides appear to revel in Musk's uncompromising style of governance. But his backing is far from unanimous, according to Reuters interviews.

Musk, the world's richest person, spent over a quarter of a billion dollars to help Trump win last year's presidential election. After Trump's November victory, Musk began to spend extended periods of time with Trump, who has called Musk "fantastic" and praised DOGE staffers as a group of "super geniuses."

As chief of staff, Wiles is one of Washington's top power brokers. Under her management, Trump's latest presidential campaign was widely praised as his most disciplined to date. She has a reputation for being self-effacing, turning down an invitation from Trump to speak to the crowd on the night he won the election. Multiple White House officials said they've never heard her raise her voice. She is often spotted by Trump's side while traveling on Air Force One. On a recent trip to California, when the cameras turned in her direction, she moved away.

Musk, meanwhile, is known for his intense, freewheeling approach to work and his enthusiasm for the limelight. He often posts dozens of times a day on his social media platform X, takes suggestions from site users and touts his propensity to work through the weekend.

(Ulmer reported from San Francisco. Slattery and Bose reported from Washington. Additional reporting by Jeff Mason and Steve Holland. Editing by Colleen Jenkins and Jason Szep)

Elon Musk has to fill out a public financial disclosure, legal experts say. Where is it?

Erin Mansfield

Three months after President [Donald Trump](#) announced [Elon Musk](#) would head up [a cost-cutting initiative](#), and nearly a month after its official creation, the White House has not made public an ethics form disclosing the tech billionaire's finances or his conflicts of interest.

Trump has classified Musk in a category of temporary federal worker that is required to fill out the same ethics form as Cabinet officials, according to ethics law experts who spoke to USA TODAY. And he's required to file it publicly, they said.

But while confirmed appointees who run other agencies for Trump have not only filled out disclosure forms but reached agreements to divest from their conflicts of interest, the federal ethics website doesn't show any such disclosure or agreement for Musk.

Ethics forms filed by cabinet members including Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent, Defense Secretary [Pete Hegseth](#) and Homeland Security Secretary [Kristi Noem](#) are already [available to the public](#).

[More:Firings across federal government begin after Trump, Musk order sweeping cuts](#)

Elizabeth Horton, a spokesperson for the Office of Government Ethics, said her office does not discuss specific individuals.

“He is filing the proper financial disclosure, and he is complying with all applicable federal laws,” Karoline Leavitt, Trump's press secretary, [said of Musk on Wednesday](#). “We're very confident with the ethics and the guardrails that have been put in place here.” The White House did not respond to an inquiry asking if Musk had completed the task.



Requirements for special government employees

The White House announced Feb. 3 that Musk would be designated as a special government employee. That's someone who works for the federal government, but only for about a third of the year. His Department of Government Efficiency is based inside the White House.

“People who exercise power in the executive branch, who have a discretion and can affect the financial well-being of others in the executive branch, have to file publicly available financial disclosure forms,” said Kathleen Clark, an ethics professor at Washington University School of Law in St. Louis. “And that has not happened.”

Richard Briffault, a professor at Columbia Law School who previously served on New York City's conflicts of interest board, had the same read of federal

law. He said Musk is required to file ethics disclosures publicly, just like Cabinet appointees.

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More:[Elon Musk's X settles Donald Trump's free speech lawsuit brought after Jan. 6 ban](#)

Briffault said special government employees can get waivers from filling out financial disclosures if it's unlikely the person's government work or outside employment would create a conflict of interest. "It strikes me that given his widespread interest, that probably would be a hard standard to meet," he said of Musk.

At a press conference Wednesday, Leavitt did not confirm or deny whether Trump signed a waiver for Musk.

On Monday morning, Sen. Adam Schiff, a Democrat from California, said he'd sent letters [to the ethics office](#) and the White House asking whether Musk has filled out a financial disclosure, and whether an official in the White House issued a waiver.

"If Elon Musk is now a government employee, he is subject to conflicts of interest law," Schiff [wrote on X](#), which Musk owns. "Requirements he seems to be completely ignoring. The American people deserve answers and accountability."

Later that day, Trump fired the head of the Office of Government Ethics, who was confirmed under former President Joe Biden. The agency maintains a public database of financial disclosure forms and ethics agreements that top government employees have filed, including Trump's Cabinet appointees.

More:[75,000 federal workers take President Trump's buyouts as offer expires](#)

Clark said there are thousands of government employees, such as those who oversee grant contracts, who are allowed to file their financial disclosures confidentially. Even more don't have to file forms at all.

But she said Musk doesn't fit either category.

“There is no more powerful person in the federal government right now actively exercising power than Elon Musk,” she said.



Musk, Trump respond to ethics concerns

In the Oval Office on Tuesday, Musk said members of the public would be outspoken if they saw him taking actions that present a conflict of interest. “I

mean, you can see," he said. "Am I doing something that benefits my companies or not? It's totally obvious."

Trump added, "We would not let him do that segment or look in that area if we thought there was a lack of transparency or a conflict of interest, and we watch that also. He's a big businessman. He's a successful guy. That's why we want him doing this. We don't want an unsuccessful guy doing this."



Musk is the richest man in the world whose most famous companies are Tesla and SpaceX. Tesla is regulated by the Federal Aviation Administration, and the Trump administration has tasked his team with upgrading its air traffic control system. SpaceX has contracts with the Department of Defense, which Trump said would be one of Musk's next cost-cutting targets.

Musk also said Tuesday that looking into the Department of Defense is not a conflict of interest because he doesn't file the individual contracts. "If you see

any contract where it was awarded to SpaceX and it wasn't by far the best value for the taxpayer, let me know," he said. "Because every one of them was."

Errol Musk Says Son Elon 'Hasn't Been a Good Father' in Wild Interview

Story by Leigh Kimmins

Errol Musk has branded his billionaire son a bad father and said Elon was never there for his mega brood of children.

Errol, who himself is a famously terrible dad, admitted his own indiscretions but said—perhaps tongue-in-cheek—that the Tesla and SpaceX CEO will have him “shot” for going public with his opinions. Elon has previously claimed his father had done “almost every evil thing you can possibly think of.”

Errol, who had Elon with Maye Musk in 1971, flapped his gums on all manner of subjects during a wide-ranging chat on the ‘Wide Awake’ podcast. And when posed the question of whether the younger Musk is a good father, the South African former engineer and emerald dealer went for the jugular.

“No, he hasn't been a good father. The first child was too much with nannies and died in the care of a nanny. If Elon hears this, he's going to shoot me or something,” Errol said.

Errol was talking about Elon's fist child, Nevada Alexander, who passed away at just 10 weeks old from Sudden Death Syndrome (SIDS).

“Then he had five children, each one had their own nanny. It was a weird situation. He didn't spend enough time with them,” he noted.

He said the situation led to strange results for him and his brother Kimball's kids. “The result is the boys and Kimball's two boys grew up not able to cross a street. Even the street outside, my daughters would say ‘Dad, you won't believe it. Elon's kids and Kimmel's boys, they can't cross the road. We have to hold their hands across the road when they're like 14-years-old, can't cross the road.’”

He made the strange assertion that this is why one of Kimball's children, and one of Musk's, became trans. "Elon's gotta deal with it. It's, it's a bit worrying," he added.

Elon Musk joins President Donald Trump during an executive order signing in the Oval Office. / Andrew Harnik / Getty Images

Musk, a father of 12 kids in total, has recently wheeled out young X in front of the cameras around Washington D.C., to the chagrin of his ex wife musician Grimes. He also had Exa Dark Sideræl and Techno Mechanicus with Grimes.

His estranged trans daughter Vivian Wilson is notably critical of him.

Wilson, 20, has distanced herself from Musk since she became an adult. Her mom is Musk's ex-wife, Justine Musk, with whom the world's richest man shares six children.

Musk had twins Strider and Azure with Neuralink director Shivon Zilis in November 2021. The pair also had another child, name unknown, last year.