

California Tesla drivers feel conflicted about their cars over Musk

Warm-up question: Have you ever changed your opinion about a brand or product because of something the company or its leadership did?

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California's adoption rate for electric vehicles is higher than anywhere in the country. And when it comes to Teslas, 1 in 3 sold last year in the U.S. was sold in California. But ever since Tesla founder Elon Musk took a central role in the Trump administration, Tesla's stock prices have declined by about a third since inauguration. And some Tesla drivers in California are **feeling conflicted**, CapRadio's Laura Fitzgerald reports.

LAURA FITZGERALD: On any given day in Berkeley, you're likely to see what looks like a **motorcade** of identical Teslas driving by. But lately, more and more Tesla drivers in this **notoriously** liberal city are putting anti-Elon Musk bumper stickers on their cars. Fred Liao has one of these stickers. He pulls up to the Berkeley Trader Joe's in his Model 3.

FRED LIAO: I feel ashamed driving Tesla now. I don't think it's right for very rich people to influence our decision-making process in this so kind of direct way.

FITZGERALD: At a grocery store across town, Christine Will parks her Model X. She doesn't have a sticker but is in the market for one.

What is yours going to say, you think?

CHRISTINE WILL: That I bought it before I knew he was **nuts**, basically.

FITZGERALD: Will was an early Tesla adopter. She says she got her car back in 2016.

WILL: I was **on board** with the whole EV, climate change, all of that, and was excited about the range. You want to do what you can, but I, at the same time, don't want to be supporting this.

FITZGERALD: Not everyone in Berkeley feels this way. Vipul Garg likes that his Tesla is better for the environment and says he doesn't really pay much attention to Musk.

VIPUL GARG: His opinions are his opinions. The product he's made is different from the person.

FITZGERALD: Meanwhile, other Tesla drivers are taking their **resistance** a step further and trying to sell their cars. Recent data from the California Energy Commission shows that EV sales leveled off in 2024 after years of rapid growth. Tesla sales dropped by more than 10% in the state. EV experts say Tesla's dip likely has a lot to do with increased competition from other manufacturers, but is it possible that some people's disapproval of Musk and Tesla could start to impact California's broader EV market?

JAMES SALLEE: Yes. Because Tesla is such a large part of the market, I think there's a very real chance that this can have an effect on the market overall.

FITZGERALD: James Sallee is an EV and economic expert at UC Berkeley. He says EVs are more likely to be adopted in more liberal and **affluent** regions, like Berkeley. It's too soon to tell, but he says if drivers in these communities sell their Teslas and opt for a different EV, it's possible people in redder parts of the country could end up buying them.

SALLEE: Then, on net, we could get an increase in electric vehicles if, suddenly, Elon Musk's identity switch causes an embrace of electric vehicles in the part of America that had very low take-up previously.

FITZGERALD: Tesla didn't respond to a request for comment about the recent dip in sales in California or **backlash** from some consumers against the company.

FITZGERALD: Protests against Musk have been popping up in liberal areas around the country. Some have been small, but in Berkeley, over 100 people came out to protest in front of a Tesla showroom. Protester Matthew O'Neill said he had friends who lost their jobs as part of Musk and Trump's efforts to shrink the federal workforce.

MATTHEW O NEILL: And DOGE and Elon have no idea what they do. They do great work, and now they're out jobs.

FITZGERALD: I ask O'Neill whether he feels like Musk's politics impact his willingness to get an electric car. He says he already drives a EV, but it isn't a Tesla. For NPR News, I'm Laura Fitzgerald in Berkeley.

Vocabulary and Phrases:

1. **Feel conflicted:** To have mixed or opposing emotions about something.
2. **Motorcade:** A group of vehicles traveling together, often used for official or important people.
3. **Notoriously:** Known for something, often in a negative way.
4. **Nuts:** Acting in a crazy, extreme, or irrational way.
5. **On board:** In agreement with or supportive of an idea or plan.
6. **Resistance:** Opposition or pushback against something.
7. **Affluent:** Wealthy or having a lot of money.
8. **Backlash:** A strong and often negative reaction to an event or decision.

Comprehension Questions:

1. Why are some Tesla drivers in California feeling conflicted?
2. What kind of bumper stickers are some Tesla owners putting on their cars?
3. How has Tesla's stock price changed since Musk took a central role in the Trump administration?
4. What reasons do some Tesla owners give for wanting to sell their cars?
5. What trend has been observed in EV sales in California?
6. According to James Sallee, how could Musk's political shift impact EV sales across the country?

Discussion Questions:

1. Have you ever regretted buying something because of the company behind it? What happened?
2. Do you think a company's leadership and political stance should influence consumer choices? Why or why not?
3. If you owned a Tesla, would Musk's involvement in politics affect your opinion of the car? Why or why not?
4. Can you think of a time when public backlash influenced a company's sales or reputation? What happened?
5. Would you ever buy a secondhand electric car? Why or why not?