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How to overcome the biggest obstacle to electric vehicles

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Packing ever more ions into ever smaller batteries, covering the landscape with charging stations, lowering the cost to make electric cars and trucks: these are complex, exciting challenges that engineers, regulators and others will probably solve. The tougher problem, the one that may define the limit of the American market for electric vehicles, is much stupider. It is polarisation, the stuff that makes an EV go but in its metaphorical incarnation is cursing not only America's politics but, increasingly, its culture and marketplace.

Three researchers who studied the adoption of electric and plug-in hybrid vehicles between 2012 and 2022 discovered that fully half of them went to Americans living in the 10% of counties with the highest proportion of Democratic voters. A third went to just the top 5% of such places. The pattern held even when the researchers controlled for income and population density.

This problem has caught the attention of one of America's most experienced Republican campaign operatives, Mike Murphy. A past devotee of internal combustion, Mr Murphy grew up in Detroit and boasts he has averaged about eight miles per gallon over the years. But when he traded in his Porsche for an electric BMW he became entranced by both the superior performance and the community of engineers and enthusiasts trying to overcome the obstacles to electrification. "It's like the Apollo programme," he says. "They're full of joy. They're solving really tough engineering problems and have a purpose to that. And that's a bit infectious."

Mr Murphy decided to apply his skills to knocking down the barrier that the scientists were less equipped to defeat. In January he launched an outfit, the EV Politics Project, to advise automakers on how to overcome Republican resistance and also to counter what he expects, in the 2024 campaign, to be an intensifying barrage of attacks on electrification.

Mr Trump has identified in the polarisation over electric vehicles the kind of energy that has powered his politics since 2016. He has claimed electric vehicles are bad for the environment, require charging every 15 minutes and will cause 40% of American auto jobs to disappear in a year or two. Some Republican-led states have begun imposing fees on EVs, restrictions on how they can be sold and even new taxes, purportedly to make up for lost fuel-tax revenue, though Republican leaders, starting with Mr Trump, do not habitually object to tax avoidance.

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