

Don't Let Big Oil Stop Clean Transportation

One of the military theorist Sun-tzu's tactics set out in his classic *The Art of War* is to “divide and conquer.” That is exactly what some opponents of electric vehicles are doing. Every year the oil industry can delay the shift to EVs translates into hundreds of billions of dollars of extra profits.

According to the Natural Resources Defense Council, the six largest oil and gas companies with U.S. operations raked in a record-breaking \$168 billion in profits in 2022—in just 12 months equaling about half of the 10-year investment in last year's Inflation Reduction Act aimed at speeding the transition to clean energy.

Unfortunately, there is ample evidence that big oil's efforts to stoke the fires of division are increasing. The industry's disinformation campaign is so egregious that a House of Representatives investigation found big oil has misled the public about its central role in causing the climate crisis and has impeded efforts to find solutions.

A *New York Times* article published in 2018 clearly exposed the successful stealth campaign financed by oil companies to roll back federal regulations reducing greenhouse gas pollution from cars, including paying for Facebook ads and websites. With the Biden administration reversing that rollback and proposing even tougher standards, it's no surprise that ExxonMobil recently launched a new advertising campaign to discredit electric vehicles.

The oil industry has political allies. Conservative attorneys general, with the oil-rich state of Texas in a prominent leadership role, have filed lawsuits hoping that the Supreme Court will strike down the decades-long authority of California and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to require the sales of EVs and other cleaner cars. We



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can expect EVs to become a wedge issue in the 2024 election season, with conservative media likely to call it a “ban” on gasoline car sales.

I have spent most of my three-decade career working for science-based environmental organizations advocating for cleaner transportation, first at the Union of Concerned Scientists and then at the Natural Resources Defense Council. I have served on two National Academy of Sciences committees to review EV and other clean car technologies.

Much of my time was spent on refuting specious criticism. I've debunked arguments that EVs are simply “elsewhere emitting vehicles”—not if they are charging using renewable electricity. And that the battery-manufacturing emissions take back any tailpipe pollution benefits over the vehicle's lifetime—shown to be based on poor data on early pilot production of batteries. Or that the price of batteries would never come down to a reasonable level—Tesla and other car manufacturers have crushed that argument.

To be clear, there are legitimate criticisms of transportation electrification. Comments offered in the spirit of getting it right are necessary, and serve an important role in the public policy debate.

In order to avert the worst impacts of climate change, climate advocates must join forces with equity and mobility advocates to push for building fewer car-dependent communities, fully funding mass transit, and developing more vibrant mobility ecosystems—all important components of a sustainable transportation strategy that rapidly transitions to clean energy.

Another area that needs urgent attention involves critical minerals like lithium and cobalt: ensuring responsible mining practices are adopted before the industry is fully locked into poor practices defined by the lowest common denominator. What is needed is a race to the top to create consumer demand for a supply chain that respects human rights, communities, and the environment.

However trite it may sound, we must not let the perfect be the enemy of good. We must not forget about the frontline communities across the world who are suffering the impacts of pollution and corruption caused by one of the largest, dirtiest industries on the planet. Let's not let the oil industry win by dividing communities at this critical moment in our efforts to create a zero-emitting, equitable, and fossil-fuel-free transportation future.