

Why do so many people hate Elon Musk?

Story by Maeve Reston

The moment that crystallized the ethos of Elon Musk for Janet Yoshitake, 71, was when the CEO of SpaceX and Tesla told podcaster Joe Rogan that the “fundamental weakness of Western civilization is empathy.”

For Joel Morin, a 67-year-old self-described “cable guy” from San Diego, it was Musk’s decision to pace the stage in sunglasses at the Conservative Political Action Conference throttling a chain saw “while putting tens of thousands of Americans out of work just to enrich himself.”

Meta Valentic, a Democrat from Culver City, California, who did not want to give her age, said she can no longer listen to Musk’s voice because it makes her feel physically ill. She is most angered by what she describes as Musk’s “hypocrisy” as he has slashed government services as a special adviser to President Donald Trump without acknowledging how he has relied on government largesse and policies to build his own empires.

“He made his money off the backs of all of us,” she said, referring to Musk’s reliance on at least [\\$38 billion](#) in government contracts, loans, subsidies and tax credits for his businesses, according to a Washington Post analysis. “He may think that we don’t need to help the rest of the world, but he’s from the rest of the world — and we sure helped him.”

Amid collapsing popularity, Musk told investors April 22 that he will step back from overseeing his government cost-cutting creation, the U.S. DOGE Service, also known as the Department of Government Efficiency. The decision followed a period in which Tesla’s [profits plunged](#) by 71 percent compared with the first quarter of 2024 and he had become the regular butt of jokes on “Saturday Night Live” and on his own social media site, X. When he formally leaves his government post, which is expected to be in May, it will be a moment of celebration for the thousands of voters like Yoshitake, Morin and Valentic, who all played bit parts in Musk’s troubles by protesting his influence in the streets and online.

During his short stint in government service, Musk became a singular object of loathing for many Democrats and independents. As his young team at the U.S. DOGE Service abruptly canceled grants and cut thousands of jobs at federal agencies with what appeared to be little research or study, Musk breathed new life into the Democratic opposition and simplified the party's discordant message into a one-liner about fighting the greed of "the oligarchy."

For much of the past six months, Musk has routinely been at Trump's side at the White House and at the president's private Mar-a-Lago Club. But his presence has faded somewhat in recent weeks, and he has picked fights during the debate over Trump's turbulent tariff policies, including ridiculing [pro-tariff Trump adviser Peter Navarro](#) as a "moron" who was "dumber than a sack of bricks."

When he popped up recently in a more lighthearted moment [live-streaming](#) the video game Path of Exile 2 on X, dozens of gamers entered the [chat](#) to castigate him with predictions that he would die alone and other negative messages. "YOU WILL ALWAYS FEEL INSECURE AND IT WILL NEVER GO AWAY," one of them read.

At Democratic protests and gatherings this year, there often have been as many signs vilifying Musk as Trump. Fifty-seven percent of Americans [disapprove of the way Musk has handled his job](#) in the Trump administration — higher than the 49 percent who said the same in February, according to a [Washington Post-ABC News-Ipsos national poll](#). The anti-Musk sentiment among liberals has intensified since February, and he is notably less popular than [the unpopular president](#) he supports.

During [a briefing with reporters](#) this week, Musk said the work of trying to make government more efficient has been "really difficult" and compared it to "changing the direction of a fleet of supertankers." He also acknowledged the intense blowback and alluded to the vandalization of cars at Tesla dealerships: "Being attacked relentlessly is not super fun. Seeing cars burning is not fun."

Republican strategist Mike Murphy, who has been critical of Trump, said Musk is unique because while past presidents have brought in influential private-sector advisers, "there's never been a president who abrogated so much power with so little insight to such an unproven operator on government topics."

“There’s no light touch to Elon — he rubbed salt right into the liberal wound,” Murphy said. The intensity about Musk among liberals, he said, is rooted in the fact that some viewed him initially as an ally on environmental issues and electric vehicles. “There’s no hate like the hate for a convert,” Murphy said.

At the same time, Musk is a hero to many in the “Make America Great Again” movement, and he commands an enormous audience, with more than 219 million followers on his X social media platform.

At Trump's first Cabinet meeting of his second term, the president expressed strong approval of Musk's actions, and Cabinet members offered applause. © Jabin Botsford/The Washington Post

Trump said during a recent [Oval Office appearance](#) that he couldn’t speak more highly of any individual than Musk, calling him “brilliant,” “a great patriot” and a “wonderful person.”

“He was treated very unfairly by — I guess you would call it the public, by some of the public,” Trump said. “He makes an incredible car; everything he does is good. But they took it out on Tesla and I just thought it was so unfair, because he’s trying to help the country.”

Musk admirers like Peter Vaillancourt, a 68-year-old landscaper from Manchester, New Hampshire, said more time is needed to see if Musk — who he called “a smart guy” — can succeed in using his business sense to make government more efficient.

“The bottom of the barrel is getting fed, hand fed. The rich are getting richer, and the middle class — if you’re not gonna make it rich, you’re heading down the tubes.” Vaillancourt said. “Our government needs businessmen running government — that’s why when I saw Trump running I said, ‘It’s about flipping time.’”

‘We feel betrayed’

The contempt for Musk runs particularly deep in California, a state that once [welcomed him](#) as an environmentally conscious innovator and celebrated his

expansion of Tesla's footprint in the state. In interviews with more than three dozen voters who attended protests against the administration in recent weeks, many said they initially admired Musk in his early days with Tesla.

But that sentiment faded as they watched him use his massive wealth to align himself with Trump and the right-wing MAGA movement — and then go on to lead the chaotic DOGE cost-cutting effort, which has gutted a swath of federal agencies while providing relatively marginal savings so far.

Critiques of Musk touched on a half-dozen common themes: Greed. Narcissism. Power. Callousness. Immaturity. And the view that Musk was an uninvited outsider who failed to understand the country's values before he ascended to one of the most powerful roles in government.

Demonstrations denouncing Musk have taken place around the world. This one, in February, was outside a Tesla dealership near Cleveland. © Dustin Franz/For The Washington Post

There was a time not so long ago when Jessica Sisak, a Pasadena writer and web developer, wanted a Tesla. She had followed Musk with interest, believing he was focused on "saving the environment," she said.

"We feel betrayed," Sisak said, standing on a sidewalk during a recent protest as people drove by honking in support of her sign proposing to send Musk to Mars. "He's a phony. He's a fake and has no sense of himself."

Sisak said she isn't sure that Musk ramping down his role in government will help much: "I think they've done so much damage at this point that it's going to take generations."

Yoshitake — who also lives in California, in Montebello — was also initially impressed by Musk's innovation at Tesla. But then he dove into right-wing politics "and everything in our social lives." She became unnerved by the frequency of his posts on X at all hours of the day and night. "He has to insert himself into everything," she said. "He has an opinion about [Taylor Swift](#) and about gays. He wants to control everything we think."

When Trump ushered Musk into his administration, Yoshitake began tracking the intersection of Musk's business interests and his influence on government policy.

“I mean at some point that amount of greed is a mental illness,” Yoshitake said.

“You hear the word billionaire so often, I think people get numb to what it means,” interjected her friend Eugene Van Cise, a 68-year old retired city worker from Sierra Madre who joined Yoshitake at the Pasadena protest. “A billion is a thousand million. So if you accumulated wealth at the rate of a million dollars a year, it would take you 1,000 years, or 10 centuries, to get to a billion. This guy has hundreds of billions and it’s not enough. It will never be enough.”

Deb Aldrich, who is from Pasadena, said Musk is just one of a breed of men she’s encountered throughout her career in the design and tech industries.

“I’ve known a lot of guys like him,” Aldrich said, describing Musk as a “tech bro.” “They’re threatened, and they’re insecure, and they’re angry and they take their power to the next level to make sure no one else has it. And then they’re just going to kind of divide up the country and share it.”

On Presidents' Day, about 1,400 “Hands Off” protests were held nationwide, with a focus on Musk as well as on Trump and others in the administration. A protester expresses his opinion on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. © Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post

The unelected foreigner

Almost universally, protesters who took to the streets to decry Musk’s influence have taken issue with his unelected status and his migration to the U.S. after growing up in South Africa and living for a time in Canada. Signs bearing the message “Deport Elon” have been ubiquitous at protests in recent months.

“I feel like it is uniquely ironic and horrifying that he himself is an immigrant, and so much of his individual impact is on our immigrant population,” said Jenni Frank, a 52-year-old freelance writer from Newport Beach, referring to the efforts by DOGE to [access personal information](#) held by government agencies that could assist with the Trump administration’s deportation operations.

Tom Maxfield, 76, said Musk has seemed unable to grasp why social safety net systems like Social Security, Medicaid and Medicare are considered by many to be sacrosanct pillars in American society. One potential reason for that disconnect,

Maxfield suggested, is that unlike many immigrants to America, Musk arrived with money and didn't "start off at the bottom."

"He's not in touch with our culture," said Maxfield, a former cultural anthropologist who retired after a career as a building contractor. He noted that Musk grew up in an atmosphere of privilege within a wealthy family during apartheid in South Africa.

"I think it's really sad that he's as uneducated as he is," said Maxfield, who made an orange protest sign that said, "You can be rich and stupid."

Justin Beam, a 42-year-old Army veteran who served for twelve years, from 2005 to 2017, said Musk "has no business" being in government and seems to not understand the promises that the U.S. government has made both to its citizens and its veterans.

Beam described Musk as a "ready, shoot, aim kind of guy" and said the DOGE cuts at Veterans Affairs amount to "breaking faith with our veterans."

"It's [kind of like Social Security](#) — we served with the expectation of having these benefits — and I think that the country is behind benefits for veterans," Beam said. Because of those promises, the VA cuts that Musk is attempting to push through show that he doesn't grasp that "you can't run the government like a business."

"There are going to be some things that don't make you money, but they are important to your constituents," Beam said. Musk, he said, "got in there way too fast, did way too much and he doesn't really understand what he's doing."