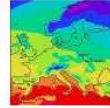




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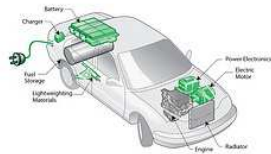
THE VINE

What'll It Take For Electric Cars To Catch On?

Bradford Plumer November 16, 2009 | 4:46 pm [SHARE](#) [f](#) [t](#) [p](#)

Via Elana Schor, a group of automakers, utilities, and shipping companies have banded together to form the Electrification Coalition, which will lobby for a massive federal push toward electric vehicles in the coming months. The coalition's extensive "roadmap" argues that plug-in hybrids and all-electric vehicles could make up a whopping 75 percent of all vehicle-miles traveled in the United States by 2040. (Notably, the report implicitly assumes that Americans will keep driving more and more in the decades to come, and that efforts to become less auto-dependent or curb sprawl won't get very far.)

Now, if electric cars could make that kind of rapid progress, it'd be a huge deal. The cars could largely run on our existing electric infrastructure, assuming we had a smart grid or smart chargers to power cars up during off-peak hours. Plus, even if all those plug-in vehicles were being charged by coal and gas plants, carbon-dioxide emissions would still fall, since electric motors are far more efficient than combustion engines. (Ideally, though, many vehicles would be charged by non-fossil energy—if anything, electric vehicles would make good storage options for wind power, which largely cranks up at night.) Plus, the United States could eliminate its need for oil imports, which would mean more stable prices at the "pump" and fewer dollars sent abroad to places like Saudi Arabia.



But is a massive electrification push doable? It all depends. The necessary infrastructure won't likely materialize on its own, even if the price of oil rose. The government will have to offer incentives to set up charging stations, and it would ideally start in a few key

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"ecosystem" cities. Once the technology's demonstrated and reaches a critical mass, it'd be more likely to catch on. One snag, though, is that battery prices will have to keep dropping for electric cars to become anything more than a niche product. (And not everyone's so sure that batteries *will* naturally keep getting cheaper and more powerful, the way microchips have—in October, Lux Research **singled out** slow advances in battery technology as a major hurdle for the electric-vehicle industry.)

The report also notes that consumer behavior will have to change. Right now, when buying cars, people tend to focus far more on the sticker price of a vehicle and less on how much it will cost to drive a car over the course of its lifetime. Electric cars may be cheaper to drive per mile, especially if oil prices keep rising, but most people are psychologically repulsed by their high upfront cost. And, the coalition argues, Congress isn't likely to hike gas taxes in the coming year.

Indeed, that last point is one reason why Better Place's big idea for electric vehicles could catch on—under **their system**, Better Place owns the batteries and charges you for every mile you drive, much like cell-phone companies do. As a result, the company can in theory charge less for the car itself, since customers aren't buying the battery. (Better Place isn't a member of the Electrification Coalition, although they would also benefit from trial cities with a well-developed charging infrastructure; they'd just add their battery-swapping stations to let people drive longer distances without recharging.)

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