



The Prius, EVs, and conservative media attacks

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Back in the early 1990s, when Bill Clinton was running for U.S. President, his handlers set up a kind of instant-response war room charged with countering the attacks of his various opponents. It worked, and helped to put him in the White House. Something like that war room is in play today, as feedback [from my Prius blog this week](#) shows.

Savvy media management in today's hyper-kinetic, 24/7 wired world brought Media Matters to my mailbox this week. Someone named Jess Levin of Media Matters for America sent me a long and detailed item comparing the attacks on the Prius of a decade or so ago to those being hurled at electric vehicles (EVs) today.

"I wanted to pass along our latest post looking back at how the conservative media attacked the Prius, now the world's third best-selling car, when it was first released," she said.

"These attacks are similar to those now being levelled against electric vehicles," writes Levin, the press secretary at Media Matters.

A few cases in point provided by Media Matters:

- Diane Katz and Henry Payne wrote in The Wall Street Journal (2000) that hybrid cars are not "what the public wants."
- The Cato Institute's Patrick Michaels (and no, I do not belong to nor did I found the Cato Institute) declared in 2001 that the Prius would "never" deliver a profit for Toyota and hyped how "demand has been weak" for hybrids.
- In 2004, Fox News guest David Naughton of Newsweek said "Hummer outsells the Toyota Prius by two to one. And even Toyota sells as many Camrys in a couple of months as they will an entire year of Prius."
- The Weekly Standard's Henry Payne (2004) called tax incentives for hybrid vehicles a "sweet bonus for upscale customers like Arianna Huffington and Cameron Diaz."
Media Matters suggests that criticism of EVs today "is strikingly similar to the conservative narrative that electric car subsidies only benefit the rich, when in fact tax incentives help make electric vehicles available to the middle class, just as they did with the Prius."

The point is, there is a movement afoot – some of it co-ordinated, some spontaneous and haphazard – to boost EVs by pointing to the success of the Prius. The Prius "survived all the scorn, and became an undeniable success story. In 15 years – particularly if a serious climate change policy is implemented – will we be saying the same thing about the electric car?" notes Media Matters.

Perhaps. What is certain is that the Prius survived and grew in popularity because a gigantic Japanese car company with deep, deep pockets committed to hybrid technology in a thoroughly comprehensive way. Moreover, the Prius has thrived thanks to successes in the Japanese home market – successes which, even today, are subsidized by the taxpayer.

It is also worth noting that the Japanese love affair with the automobile is largely over, at least among young people. Larry Dominique, the former head of North American product planning at Nissan, told me recently that most Japanese people are interested in transportation appliances, not fast, sexy cars. That movement is starting to happen in Europe, too. The Prius is an excellent transportation appliance.

"Fortunately, in Canada and the U.S., we still love our cars," he told me.

But in 15 years, who knows? Perhaps the love affair is doomed here, too. Perhaps hybrids and electric cars will dominate one day. If so, I expect Media Matters to send me a note tracing it all back to the Prius and Toyota's commitment to it as the reason why.

Take that, you right-wing media types.