

The Chevy Bolt recall is burning up what's left of GM's EV good will

General Motors plans to launch 30 new electric vehicles around the world by 2025, and aspires to sell only zero-emissions vehicles by 2035. But over the last few years, the United States' biggest automaker has once again squandered the advantages it held in the still-burgeoning field of electric vehicles through bad politics, bad investments, and now most notably, a massive recall of the Bolt – currently its only all-electric vehicle – thanks to around a dozen reported fires.

On Thursday, GM announced that it is extending the Bolt's production shutdown until mid-October, as it apparently hasn't been able to get supplier LG to produce replacement batteries that are up to snuff. It will need a lot of them, too, as GM has recalled all Bolts made to date – nearly 150,000. (The company says some vehicles will only need certain modules replaced, while others will get the whole battery pack swapped.)

In the meantime, GM gave Bolt owners something else to worry about this week, as it advised them to park at least 50 feet away from other vehicles. That's in addition to the previous guidance owners have received, including parking away from their homes, not charging overnight, not charging above 90 percent, or letting their vehicle's battery drain below around 70 miles of range.

GM's early push into electric vehicles is looking more like a false start

All of this has made owning a Bolt a stressful and confusing affair, despite the apparently low odds of a fire. Some owners have tried to get GM to buy back their Bolts – which the company has done in some cases – only to be rejected. Updates from the company have been intermittent since the initial recall in November 2020. It took until May 2021 for the automaker to announce its first attempted fix for the problem (which wound up not working), and it wasn't until July of that year that GM finally admitted what the problem was in the first place.

“This has been a very complex recall, but we've been moving as quickly as possible to provide our customers with information as we learned new developments alongside our supplier, LG,” Kevin Kelly, who leads Chevy's PR team, told *The Verge* in an email. “We understand and can certainly appreciate the frustration that our Bolt EV owners have experienced over the past few months, but we're committed to doing the right thing for our customers and we know we have to get the recall repair right.”

“We continue to make progress and will work as quickly possible and inform owners when we have new information to share,” he said.

The Bolt has been one of the most competent, capable, and affordable EVs

The Bolt, which launched in 2016, was supposed to help GM accomplish two things: set up GM as the first automaker to match Tesla with a mass-market, long-range electric vehicle, and also help everyone forget GM had once briefly led in this category with the EV1 – before it so thoroughly gave up on its fledgling electric car that it literally crushed most of the remaining units to pieces.

For a while, it worked. The Bolt never did gangbusters but has been one of the most competent, capable, and affordable electric cars on the market across the last half-decade.

But while GM was making modest progress on the road, it started working against that progress in Washington. When Donald Trump became president, GM was first in line with its Detroit peers when the White House opened for business. Just days after his inauguration, they reportedly lobbied the president to loosen the Obama-era clean car standards so it would be easier to sell more profitable (but more harmful) SUVs and pickup trucks.

Trump took that inch and stretched it a country mile. His administration spent the next few years slapping together a spiteful but shoddy attempt at a far more drastic rollback of one of his predecessor's crowning climate achievements.

GM then spent time and money encouraging Trump's deregulatory tendencies

Some of those automakers, like Ford, eventually wised up and struck a compromise deal with California regulators, as the legal objections mounted to Trump's decision. But GM doubled down by joining the Trump administration's defense, and only abandoned that position after Trump lost reelection. The company maintains it only sided with the Trump administration because it shared the belief that the federal government should have the sole right to set national standards for emissions or fuel economy, though California had a waiver to the Clean Air Act that said otherwise (which Trump fought to revoke).

While GM was risking its reputation for the sake of constitutional posturing, it started making similarly questionable moves with its checkbook. First, it threw its weight around with buzzy EV startup Rivian. GM wanted exclusive rights to the technology that would power Rivian's electric pickup truck and SUV in exchange for a sizable investment. Rivian politely declined and then immediately went on to raise more than \$10 billion from the likes of Ford and Amazon on its way to an IPO that could see its value skyrocket to nearly \$100 billion – all without an exclusive deal.

Then, under intense public pressure from the Trump administration, GM sold a recently-closed plant in Lordstown, Ohio to a brand new electric pickup truck startup called Lordstown Motors run by a guy who had recently left his post in charge of another unproven EV startup called Workhorse. GM also took a small stake in Lordstown Motors and participated in the investment portion of the startup's merger with a special purpose acquisition company. GM even had the right to name a board member as part of that deal, but ultimately declined.

Spurned by Rivian, GM turned its attention to two far shakier startups

Shortly after that, GM announced a deal with hydrogen electric trucking startup Nikola, which had a pickup truck project of its own. But that soured quickly after Nikola's founder and now former CEO was accused of (and later indicted for) allegedly lying about a lot of what Nikola was capable of in late 2020. GM abruptly backed out. This year, the Lordstown Motors founder faced similar allegations and was eventually pushed out. GM still holds a small stake in Lordstown Motors, though.

GM is already back in the good graces of the Biden administration. And in a few years, with electric Hummers and Silverados cruising the roads powered by the company's next-generation battery pack, few will remember the company's involvement in two sketchy startups, or recall the automaker's failed attempt at corralling one of the hottest electric vehicle companies to come to market of our time. After all, these were the kinds of metaphorical fires that tend to be easier to extinguish.

The problems with the Bolt, however, could cast a lasting pall – because this time the flames are real.

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