

Six Ways to Rein in Musk

(And Musk's infantile response to my criticisms)

ROBERT REICH

SEP 3



Friends,

Today I want to tell you the dangers posed by an out-of-control Elon Musk (in part I), and six ways to rein him in (in part II). I also provide some personal evidence of how bonkers he is (in my P.S. at the end of today's letter).

I. Elon Musk is Out of Control

Elon Musk is rapidly transforming his enormous wealth — he's the richest person in the world — into a huge source of unaccountable political power that's now backing Trump and other global authoritarians.

Musk owns X, formerly known as Twitter. He has publicly endorsed Donald Trump. He is spending as much as \$180 million on transforming the Republican Party's field

organizing program to help Trump — to which he has brought in new leadership, including a new personal aide to help him make political decisions.

Trump and Musk have both floated the idea of governing together if Trump wins a second term. “I think it would be great to just have a government efficiency commission,” Musk said in an August 11 conversation with Trump, streamed on X. “And I’d be happy to help out on such a commission.”

In that same conversation, Trump congratulated Musk for his willingness to fire workers seeking higher wages and better working conditions. “You’re the greatest cutter,” Trump said. “I mean, I look at what you do. You walk in, you just say: ‘You want to quit?’ They go on strike — I won’t mention the name of the company — but they go on strike. And you say: ‘That’s okay, you’re all gone.’”

As the interview concluded, Musk told Trump, “I think we’re at a fork in the road of destiny, of civilization, and I think we need to take the right path, and I think you’re the right path.”

Weeks later, Musk reposted a faked version of Kamala Harris’s first campaign video with an altered voice track sounding like Harris and saying she doesn’t “know the first thing about running the country” and is the “ultimate diversity hire.” Musk tagged the video “amazing.” It’s gotten hundreds of millions of views, so far.

The Michigan secretary of state has accused the Musk-supported America PAC of tricking people into sharing personal data. Although the PAC’s website promises to help users register to vote, it allegedly asks users in battleground states to give their names and phone numbers without directing them to a voter registration site — and then uses that information to send them anti-Harris and pro-Trump ads.

According to a new report from the Center for Countering Digital Hate, Musk himself has so far this year posted 50 false election claims on X to his nearly 200 million followers. They’ve got a total of 1.2 billion views. None of them had a “community note” from X’s supposed fact-checking system.

Evidence is mounting that Russia and other foreign agents are using X to disrupt this year's presidential race, presumably in favor of Trump. Musk has done little to stop them.

Meanwhile, Musk is supporting right-wing causes around the world.

In the UK, far-right thugs burned, looted, and terrorized minority communities after Musk's X spread misinformation about a deadly attack on schoolgirls. Musk not only allowed instigators of this hate to spread these lies, but he retweeted and supported them.

At least eight times in the past 10 months, Musk has predicted a future civil war related to immigration. When anti-immigration street riots occurred across Britain, he wrote: "civil war is inevitable."

The European Union commissioner Thierry Breton sent Musk an open letter reminding him of EU laws against amplifying harmful content "that promotes hatred, disorder, incitement to violence, or certain instances of disinformation" and warning that the EU "will be extremely vigilant" about protecting "EU citizens from serious harm."

Musk's response was a meme that said: "TAKE A BIG STEP BACK AND LITERALLY, F*CK YOUR OWN FACE!"

Elon Musk calls himself a "free speech absolutist," but he has accepted over 80 percent of censorship requests from authoritarian governments. Two days before the Turkish elections, he blocked accounts critical of the president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

Musk says he'll follow the law wherever it operates, but he's fighting a Brazilian Supreme Court justice who ordered Brazil's telecom agency to block access to X because X has "allowed the massive spread of disinformation, hate speech and attacks on the democratic rule of law, violating the free choice of the electorate, by keeping voters away from real and accurate information."

Musk's friendly relations with authoritarians often coincide with beneficial treatment of his businesses. Shortly after Musk suggested handing Taiwan over to the

Chinese government, Tesla got a tax break from the Chinese government. Musk has backed Argentina's Javier Milei, who then provided Musk access to his country's lithium — crucial to Tesla's batteries. Musk has backed India's Narendra Modi and secured lower import tariffs for Tesla's vehicles in India.

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II. How to Rein Musk In

He may be the richest man in the world. He may own one of the world's most influential social media platforms. He may lash out at anyone who dares criticize him. (After *The Guardian* published an earlier version of this post, Musk went on a Trump-like rant to his nearly 200 million followers, launching *ad hominem* attacks on me without disputing what I said. More details in the P.S. at the end of this letter.)

But that doesn't mean we're powerless to stop him.

Here are six ways to rein in Musk:

1. Boycott Tesla.

Consumers shouldn't be making him even richer and able to do even more harm. A Tesla boycott may have already begun; a recent poll found that one-third of Britons are less likely to buy a Tesla because of Musk's recent behavior.

2. Advertisers should boycott X.

A coalition of major advertisers has organized such a boycott. Musk is suing them under antitrust law. "We tried peace for 2 years, now it is war," he wrote on X, referring to advertisers who criticize him and X.

3. Regulators around the world should stop Musk from disseminating lies and hate on X.

On August 24, French authorities arrested Pavel Durov, founder of the online communications tool *Telegram*, which French authorities have found complicit in hate crimes and disinformation. Like Musk, Durov has styled himself as a free speech absolutist. I'm not arguing that Musk or any other disseminator of lies and hate must necessarily be charged with crimes, but they should be held legally responsible for what they publish.

4. In the United States, the Federal Trade Commission should demand that Musk take down lies that are likely to endanger individuals — and if he does not, sue him under Section 5 of the FTC Act.

Musk's free-speech rights under the First Amendment don't take precedence over the public interest. Two months ago, the Supreme Court said federal agencies may pressure social media platforms to take down misinformation — a technical win for the public good (technical because the court based its ruling on the plaintiff's lack of standing to sue).

5. The U.S. government — and we taxpayers — have additional power over Musk, if we're willing to use it. The U.S. should terminate its contracts with him, starting with Musk's SpaceX.

In 2021, the United States entered into a \$1.8 billion classified contract with SpaceX that includes blasting off classified and military satellites, according to *The Wall Street Journal*. The funds are now an important part of SpaceX's revenue.

The Pentagon has also contracted with SpaceX's Starlink broadband service to pay for internet links, despite Musk's refusal in September 2022 to allow Ukraine to use Starlink to launch an attack on Russian forces in Crimea.

Last August, the Pentagon gave SpaceX's Starshield unit \$70 million to provide communications services to dozens of Pentagon partners.

Meanwhile, SpaceX is cornering the rocket launch market. Its rockets were responsible for two-thirds of flights from U.S. launch sites in 2022 and handled 88 percent in the first six months of this year.

In deciding upon which private-sector entities to contract with, the U.S. government is supposed to consider the contractor's reliability. Musk's mercurial, impulsive, childish temperament makes him and the companies he heads unreliable. The government is also supposed to consider whether it is contributing to a monopoly. Musk's SpaceX is fast becoming one.

Why is the U.S. government allowing Musk's satellites and rocket launchers to become crucial to the nation's security when he's shown utter disregard for the public interest? Why give Musk more economic power when he repeatedly abuses it and demonstrates contempt for the public good?

There is no good reason. American taxpayers should stop subsidizing Musk.

6. Make sure Musk's favorite candidate for president is not elected.

PS: After *The Guardian* published an earlier version of this post, Musk went on a tirade — agreeing with a tweet calling me “a traitor to the American people;” then calling me “Robert Reichardt;” then saying “To be totally honest, I don't want Reich arrested, as I wouldn't want to inflict having listen to him upon his jailers. A fate worse than death!;” then identifying me as “a miniature wanker” (see below); then giving a thumbs-up emoji to a post saying I'm “so dumb as to think socialism is a good thing.”



Benjamin Ryan  @benryanwriter · Aug 31



Robert Reich is a professor of public policy at Berkeley and was Labor Secretary in Clinton's cabinet. He's not a journalist.

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 48

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 24K



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He's a miniature wanker

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