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Georgia is becoming a hub for electric vehicle production. Just don't mention climate

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 Sam Gringlas

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In Atlanta, Republican Gov. Brian Kemp stands next to a Rivian electric truck while announcing the company's plans to build a plant east of Atlanta, Dec. 16, 2021. Hyundai and Kia will also soon make electric vehicles in Georgia.

John Bazemore/AP

TALLULAH FALLS, Ga. – A short hike from the 200-foot suspension bridge that swings across Tallulah Gorge in the north Georgia mountains, Gov. Brian Kemp plugs a long charging cord into a forest green Rivian electric pickup truck.

"The light turned green, so we're charging," Kemp declares to a small group of officials who cheer this inaugural charge at Tallulah Gorge State Park, one of six state parks in Georgia now installing electric vehicle chargers.

Georgia is pushing ahead with a plan to establish itself as the "electric mobility capital of the country," or as Kemp, a Republican, recently pledged at one event – the world.

For years, Democrats have primarily led efforts to fight climate change by curbing carbon emissions. But as green industries have expanded, some Republican-led states are now racing to attract companies that make electric vehicles, batteries, wind turbines and solar panels.

As a result, Georgia is now edging out Michigan in some recent years as a top draw for new investments from auto manufacturers and suppliers, according to an analysis by the Center for Automotive Research.

Republicans walk a fine line

Hyundai, Kia and the startup Rivian will soon make electric vehicles in Georgia. Battery makers and suppliers are setting up shop nearby and a South Korean solar panel company is moving ahead with a multi-billion dollar expansion.

The state has helped lure these companies with billions of dollars worth of incentives, including tax breaks, infrastructure investments and state-supported training programs.

Kemp says the new jobs will be a game-changer for Georgia's economy.

What you don't hear Kemp talk much about, though, is the force underlying the broader drive to electrify – climate change.

"Regardless of where your politics or your beliefs are on the climate, Georgians are good stewards of the environment," Kemp tells member station WABE after the ceremony at Tallulah Gorge, invoking Georgia's agricultural roots and farmers' push for conservation.

His approach could be a blueprint for like-minded Republicans: courting clean energy jobs without acting on climate, promoting EV production without nudging people to buy them.

"I believe the best way to let a market develop is to let the consumer drive that," Kemp says. "The Biden administration has been forcing the market on people, much like the vaccine was forced on people and it turned some people off it."

Kemp says the government shouldn't shape what people buy, whether it's a Rivian versus a Ford, or a hydrogen car versus an electric one.

Democrats say Kemp's criticism is misguided

"But electrification clearly has won," says Anne Blair, policy director for the Electrification Coalition, though she agrees supporting a broad market is necessary.

Transportation is the leading source of carbon emissions driving climate change and Blair says electricity is the most cost-effective and efficient alternative for powering vehicles.

The Electrification Coalition has cheered both state support and also federal efforts, like the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law and Inflation Reduction Act. Those laws have boosted investments in public infrastructure, research and manufacturing of green technologies, as well as incentives to help consumers more easily adopt them.

U.S. Sen. Jon Ossoff, a Democrat from Georgia, says that this multi-layered approach from federal policymakers is by design.

"All part of our effort to revitalize American manufacturing, show American leadership globally on the transition from greenhouse gas-emitting combustion fuel sources and, my personal vision, that Georgia should lead not just the nation, but the world in these technologies."

The IRA included a consumer tax credit for some EVs – and will eventually apply to more EVs once they start being made in Georgia instead of internationally. Blair and Georgia's Democratic senators who championed the legislation, say Kemp's criticism of federal tax credits for consumers is misguided, even though they share many of the same goals.

"Government incentives can really help build consumer and public confidence and ultimately help boost up the industry overall," Blair says.

'Learn to speak Republican'

Outside a nondescript warehouse in Atlanta, electric vans are lined up in a row. Inside, a dozen or so people involved with the EV industry crowd a long conference table. This is what has become known as the "EV brain trust."

Over sandwiches, a company building charging locations for trucks tells the group they now have 7,000 stations up and running. A recycler explains how they turn used EV batteries into something called "black mass."

Organizer Tim Echols is vice chair of Georgia's Public Service Commission, which regulates utility companies in the state. He is a self-described "cheerleader and evangelist" for alternative fuels – since long before it was en vogue.

Echols is also a Republican.

A few years ago, he dined with a group of solar enthusiasts and remembers trying to help them fine-tune their pitch.

"I said, 'I hope you guys learn to speak Republican,'" Echols recalls. "They took that to heart. I don't know that the EV community has learned to do this yet."

Even today, some Republicans remain entirely skeptical of electric vehicles. One state lawmaker recently compared the EV transition to disruptions caused by 9/11 and Covid – and some have raised concerns about the safety and usability of electric vehicles, as well as the state's investment in them.

"It is important, I think, when you're dealing with Republicans to lead with economic development, saving money, as opposed to something like climate change or global warming that Republicans kind of push back against," Echols says.

Turns out, many states without so-called "climate ambition," including oil and gas-heavy states like Louisiana, Texas and Wyoming, are very interested in clean energy jobs, according to a 2021 report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

The report also cited Georgia, where the solar and battery business is now booming, and South Dakota, which is a major producer of biofuel.

"Just because a state does not have targets to reduce greenhouse gas emissions itself does not mean it has no aspirations to sell its products to others that do," the authors wrote.

Environmentalists are listening

Environmentalists say they support the push for jobs but still insist state policy will also need to address climate directly.

"We're focused on outcomes, so if the state is reducing the carbon footprint of the state and providing jobs along the way as they do it, that is fantastic," says Mike O'Reilly, director of policy and climate strategy for the Nature Conservancy in Georgia.

Conservation has historically been a bipartisan issue, says Monica Thornton, the chapter's executive director. She says enacting statewide climate goals is a harder sell, though she hopes the EV boom is helping leaders look beyond politics.

"We're going to have to decide whether or not we want this place to continue to be a place where our kids can run and play, and we're going to have to decide that it's important enough to put those other things aside," Thornton says.

O'Reilly points out that the state has been awarded a federal Climate Pollution Reduction Grant to develop a statewide climate action plan for the first time. Meanwhile, a handful of other states – Florida, Iowa, Kentucky and South Dakota – declined to accept the grant funding.

There hasn't been a flashy announcement, like when a new EV facility is coming to town, but O'Reilly says both are crucial for sustaining the future of the state and the country.



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