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Low energy: Estimating electric vehicle electricity use

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Abstract

We provide the first at-scale estimate of electric vehicle (EV) home charging. Previous estimates are based on conflicting surveys or are extrapolated from a small, unrepresentative sample of households with dedicated EV meters. We combine billions of hourly electricity meter measurements with address-level EV registration records from California households, including 64,000 EV owners. The average EV increases overall household load by 2.9 kilowatt-hours per day, well under half the amount assumed by state regulators. Results imply that EVs travel less than expected on electric power, raising questions about transportation electrification for climate policy.

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1 Introduction

Policymakers attempting to guide transportation electrification lack credible estimates of one of the most important pieces of information: how much electric vehicles (EVs) are actually being used. This blind spot exists because of data limitations. The vast majority of EV charging occurs at home, where it is difficult to distinguish from other end uses on the home’s master electricity meter. Until now, published estimates of residential EV load are either survey-based or extrapolated from a small, unrepresentative sample of households with dedicated EV meters. As a result, industry participants and regulators alike may have inaccurate beliefs about the private and social costs and benefits of EVs.

EV electricity consumption provides a measure of the promise of EV technology as a potential replacement for the conventional gasoline car. If EVs are being driven as much as conventional cars, it speaks to their potential as a near-perfect substitute to vehicles burning fossil fuels. If on the other hand EVs are being driven substantially less than conventional cars, it raises important questions about the potential for the technology to replace a vast majority of trips currently using gasoline. Ideally, policymakers would have a more complete picture about the role EVs play in a region’s transportation portfolio before costly and irreversible commitments are made to the technology as the primary solution to the decarbonization of transportation.

In this paper, we present the first at-scale estimates of residential EV charging load in California, home to approximately half of the EVs in the United States (Davis (2019)). Our estimates are derived from a sample of roughly 10 percent of residential electricity meters in the largest utility territory, Pacific Gas & Electric, which we merge with address-level data on EV registration records from 2014-2017. We deploy standard event study and difference-in-differences methods to estimate the change in overall household electricity load around EV registration events.

Our estimates indicate that EV load in California is surprisingly low. We find that adopting an EV increases household electricity consumption by 0.12 kilowatt-hours (kWh)

per hour, or 2.9 kWh per day. These estimates are substantially lower than official EV driving estimates used in regulatory proceedings (see, e.g., Pacific Gas and Electric, Southern California Edison, and San Diego Gas and Electric 2019). The discrepancy between the estimates likely results from selection bias in the official estimates, which are extrapolated from a very small number of households that have installed dedicated EV meters. Given the fleet of EVs in our sample, and correcting for the share of out-of-home charging, our estimates translate to approximately 1,700 electric vehicle miles traveled (eVMT) per year for plug-in hybrid EVs (PHEVs) and 6,700 eVMT per year for battery EVs (BEVs). These eVMT values are substantially less than internal combustion engine (ICE) VMT, suggesting that electricity may not be as easily substituted for gasoline as previously thought.

2 Setting and data

The California Energy Commission projects that EVs will account for almost all of the expected growth in electricity demand over the next decade (California Energy Commission (2018)). The timing and magnitude of EV load will be crucial factors in determining how electricity markets will be affected by transportation electrification. The profile of residential load is already changing rapidly as a result of investments in behind-the-meter solar generation, and EV charging may further alter the residential load profile. The timing of EV-related electricity demand will affect both the economic value of the energy consumed and marginal emissions. Further, the price responsiveness of EV loads informs the extent to which policymakers can shift charging behavior, and within-neighborhood correlations in charging should influence decisions about utility system planning in the near future.

By far the largest challenge in evaluating the economic and environmental impact of EVs to date has been the lack of quality data about either their energy demand or vehicle utilization. Absent data at scale, researchers and policymakers have been forced to rely

upon survey or measurement data from small, selected samples.¹ The resulting estimates vary widely. Using data from the 2017 National Household Travel Survey, Davis (2019) estimates that pure battery electric vehicles are driven less than two-thirds the miles of conventional cars and less than half the miles of conventional hybrids. However, a survey by the UC Davis PHEV Center finds eVMT numbers almost double those cited by Davis (PHEV Center (2020)).

As an alternative to using survey data, another method for estimating eVMT is to extrapolate miles from the electricity used in EVs. However, an EV can be charged using an ordinary household electricity connection, and does not require a separate meter, or even separate equipment, for low-voltage charging. Consequently, less than 5 percent of EVs are directly metered when charging at home (Pacific Gas and Electric, Southern California Edison, and San Diego Gas and Electric (2019)). While charging at networks operated either by commercial charging businesses or vehicle manufacturers such as Tesla is directly metered, the California Air Resources Board estimates that upwards of 85 percent of EV charging occurs at home (California Air Resources Board (2020)). Thus the vast majority of EV charging is currently unmeasured. To form projections of future electricity use, however, California state agencies utilize measurements from the small share of EVs that *are* directly metered. Of course, if charging via these meters is not representative, this may paint a very inaccurate picture of true home EV charging in the population. For example, households that install EV-specific meters may be wealthier, buy cars with bigger batteries, or simply be more inclined to use their cars more.

We assemble household-level data from two main sources: electricity meter data from a 10 percent sample of Pacific Gas & Electric Company (PG&E)’s residential customers and EV registration data from the California Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV). For more details on these data, see Burlig et al. (2021).

1. The best data on EV charging use is likely within the vehicles themselves. Most Original Equipment Manufacturers (OEMs) collect charging data from the cars they have sold, but these data are held closely due to strategic business interests and privacy concerns.

Electricity meter data We obtained three types of data from PG&E: monthly billing information, hourly electricity consumption data, and customer details. In addition to the consumption and billing data, we observe each customer’s street address, latitude and longitude, rate class, and a solar panel interconnection date, where applicable. In order to maximize the number of EVs in the dataset, the sampling frame over-weights households in Census Block Groups that have high EV penetration. The sample consists of 362,945 households and over 1.7 billion hourly electricity consumption observations. We observe that EV households are much more likely to have solar, multiple electricity meters, and consume more electricity per hour. They also have higher bill consumption and bill amounts than their non-EV-owning counterparts.

EV registration data We obtained California DMV registration records for the period 2008 to 2019. Our dataset contains the universe of EVs registered in the state during this time period. For each EV, we observe the address, make, model, year, and 7-digit VIN stem, the registration date, and a set of vehicle attributes. We also observe an anonymized unique vehicle identifier which allows us to track vehicles over time. We observe 423,297 unique vehicles in the state of California during this period, 74,468 of which are in ZIP codes belonging to the sample of the PG&E service territory that matches our analysis sample. 63,765 of these are in the PG&E service territory between 2014 and 2017, the time period of our electricity use information.

Matching We use a string matching algorithm to assign EVs to PG&E households. We begin by cleaning the data so that common words are represented in the same way in both datasets (*e.g.* “ave” vs. “avenue”; “st” vs “street”; *etc*). Next, we perform an exact match on address. We use a fuzzy string match to finalize our merge. Out of the more than 63,000

vehicles registered in ZIP codes in our main PG&E analysis sample, we matched 57,290 cars to PG&E addresses: a match rate of 89.8 percent.²

3 Empirical design and results

With access to this unique dataset on both electricity use and EV registration, we are able to empirically estimate the effects of EV ownership on residential energy use among this large sample of PG&E households.

Estimation To quantify EV usage, we estimate the causal effect of EV adoption on residential energy consumption using a panel fixed effects research design. We use a simple specification as the basis for our analysis:

$$Y_{ith} = \beta EV_{it} + \gamma Solar_{it} + \alpha_i + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{ith} \quad (1)$$

where Y_{ith} is electricity consumption (measured in kWh per hour) in household i during week-of-sample t in hour-of-day h .³ EV_{it} is a count of the number of EVs registered to household i in week t , and is equal to zero for households without EVs. $Solar_{it}$ is an indicator equal to 1 if household i has installed solar panels by week t and 0 otherwise, which we include because approximately 20 percent of the EV-owning households in our sample also have solar panels. Failing to control for this could bias our results towards zero, as installing solar reduces net electricity demand.⁴ α_i are household-by-year and household-by-month-of-year fixed effects; δ_t are week-of-sample fixed effects. Our results are robust to using more parsimonious fixed effects, including using only household fixed effects alone (see Burlig et al. 2021 for additional

2. Some of the remaining addresses belong to municipal and other local utilities which share ZIP codes with PG&E, so we would not expect them to match to PG&E addresses.

3. We collapse the data to the household $\times$ week-of-sample $\times$ hour-of-day level to speed computation time; results using the full daily data would be similar but substantially slower to estimate (Burlig et al. (2020)).

4. One concern in this setting is measurement error in treatment dates: if the DMV registration records or PG&E solar installation are misaligned with actual adoption, our treatment effect estimates will be attenuated. Therefore, our preferred specification uses a “donut” approach, where we drop the 4 weeks before and after EV and/or solar adoption for each household.

robustness). ε_{ith} is an error term, which we two-way cluster at the Census Block Group and week-of-sample levels. Here, we present two extensions to this main specification: an event study approach, where we estimate separate β and γ coefficients for the 25 weeks before and after an EV is registered and/or solar panels are installed at a household, and an hourly treatment effects approach, where we estimate separate β and γ coefficients for each hour of the day. We also explore heterogeneity by EV type: Teslas, plug-in hybrid EVs (PHEVs), and non-Tesla battery EVs (BEVs).

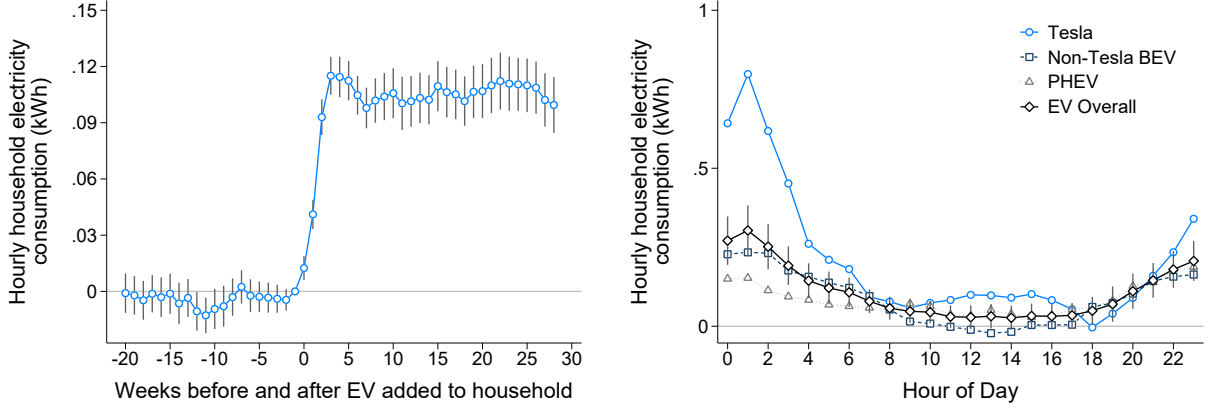
Identification In order for this approach to capture the causal effect of EV adoption on household electricity use, we require that households that adopted EVs would have remained on a similar counterfactual trend to non-adopting households in the absence of EV adoption, after controlling for our rich set of fixed effects. We provide two main pieces of evidence in favor of this assumption: first, we show in the left panel of Figure 1 below that, prior to EV adoption, there is a flat pre-trend. Second, as the right panel of Figure 1 shows, our treatment effects are concentrated in the evening hours, consistent with survey evidence about EV charging patterns (Davis (2019)). In order for our results to be explained by contemporaneous changes in electricity use other than EV adoption, these changes would need to only impact household energy use during evening hours, an unusual load profile for most appliances.

Main results We find that adopting an EV increases a household’s electricity consumption by 0.121 kWh per hour (s.e. 0.007, $p < 0.01$), or approximately 2.9 kWh per day. The left panel of Figure 1 presents this result in the form of an event study.⁵ This figure has several notable features. First, prior to EV adoption, the energy use pre-trend is very flat, providing support in favor of our identifying assumption. Second, we see a sharp increase in household

5. In this event study, we set $t = 0$ as 4 weeks prior to the registration date, because car dealers have up to 20 days to submit registration information to the DMV, and the DMV takes 8-10 business days to process registrations.

use when a household adds an EV. Finally, we see that our treatment effect is quite stable up to 25 weeks after EV adoption.

Figure 1: Impacts of EV adoption on household electricity use



Notes: This figure presents our estimates of the impact of EV adoption on household electricity consumption. The left panel plots the event study version of Equation (1). Household electricity use clearly rises in response to EV registration. This plot also indicates that there is mismeasurement in EV registration dates. The right panel plots difference-in-difference estimates by hour of day and vehicle type. We plot separate estimates for Teslas, non-Tesla BEVs, and PHEVs, as well as overall estimates using all EVs. In both plots, 95 percent confidence intervals are in gray. Standard errors are two-way clustered at the Census block group and week-of-sample level.

Heterogeneity Next, we present heterogeneous effects along two dimensions. The right panel of Figure 1 shows the effect of EV adoption on household electricity use for each hour of the day, separately by vehicle type.

We find that our EV treatment effects are concentrated between 10 PM and 6 AM. This is consistent with households charging their EVs when they come home, and leaving them plugged in over night. This hourly pattern has environmental implications, as marginal emissions on the electricity grid vary with hour of the day (Holland et al. (2016)). In California, marginal emissions are highest overnight, when the marginal electricity generator is likely to be gas-fired.

The right panel of Figure 1 also presents separate treatment effects for three vehicle types: Teslas (the modal manufacturer in our EV data), non-Tesla BEVs, and PHEVs. We

find that Teslas consume substantially more electricity than the BEVs and PHEVs, though all three types charge more at night than during the day.

Using our preferred difference-in-difference specification, we find that Teslas add 0.236 kWh per hour (s.e. 0.014, $p < 0.01$) to household consumption, while non-Tesla BEVs and PHEVs increase energy use by almost half this amount: 0.103 (s.e. 0.008, $p < 0.01$) kWh per hour and 0.090 (s.e. 0.013, $p < 0.01$) kWh per hour, respectively. This is likely to be explained by a combination of factors, including battery capacity and differential household selection into EV types.

4 Discussion

We estimate that the average PG&E EV-owning household uses 2.9 kWh per day charging their vehicle at home. By contrast, California regulators rely on residential charging data reported by the utilities for households with dedicated EV meters. These meters report daily average usage between 6 and 9.8 kWh per day (Pacific Gas and Electric, Southern California Edison, and San Diego Gas and Electric (2019)), more than twice our estimate. This discrepancy may adversely affect decisions about electricity distribution infrastructure investments, as well as lead to biased estimates of EV-related pollution abatement benefits. The implications relating to eVMT are also far-reaching.

To translate our estimates into eVMT, we first adjust for away-from-home charging. The California Low-Carbon Fuel Standard program (California Air Resources Board (2020)) indicates that between 85-90 percent of EV charging occurs at home. This figure is based on numbers that our analysis shows are likely biased; when we account for our lower in-home charging numbers, this suggests that 67 percent of charging occurs at home.⁶ We therefore scale our estimates up to obtain a total daily charging estimate. We translate this into

6. Recent LCFS administrative data breaks out self-reported total non-residential KWh. There are strong financial incentives to report non-residential charging to this program, and thus it is reasonable to assume that the vast majority of non-residential charging is reflected in the LCFS data. Even so, our assumptions allow for substantial unreported charging, and imply a greater amount of non-residential charging per vehicle during 2014-2017 than the LCFS reports for 2019.

eVMT by first assigning all non-residential charging to BEVs and then combining our Tesla and non-Tesla BEV charging estimates with vehicle-specific miles-per-kWh from DataOne Software and the overall composition of these vehicles in our sample. We find that average eVMT among PGE BEVs is approximately 6,700 eVMT per year and about 1,700 eVMT for PHEVs (which we assume only charge at home). While PHEVs likely drive additional miles on gasoline, overall eVMT is substantially lower than VMT in gasoline powered cars. This raises questions about (among other things) the true extent of EV usage at present, how EVs fit into the residential transportation portfolio, and the role of gasoline and electricity prices on EV usage.

Future research should seek to test a variety of potential explanations for the apparent low utilization of EVs. First, buyers of EVs to date may not represent the broader vehicle-owning population. Second, the marginal utility of eVMT may be lower than that of travel in conventional vehicles. This may be true for a variety of reasons, including an absence of sufficiently dense charging networks, range anxiety, or other attributes of the EV travel experience. Third, EVs may be complements to gasoline-powered vehicles, rather than substitutes for them. The vision of transportation electrification rests on EVs leading to a substitution of VMT away from conventional cars. If, instead, EVs are primarily owned by households with multiple cars, it will be important to understand why. Fourth, low eVMT may be a natural response to high electricity prices in California. While recent evidence suggests this may not be the case Bushnell, Muehlegger, and Rapson (2021), the influence of both electricity and gasoline prices on demand for and usage of EVs remains an area requiring further research. This paper demonstrates how pairing rich data on household-level electricity consumption with vehicle registration information can help answer these and other questions.

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