

Review: I'm not charged by Ford's Focus Electric

August 4 2012, By Troy Wolverton



The brand new all-electric Ford Focus is displayed as Ford Motor Company President and CEO Alan Mulally delivers a keynote address at the 2011 International Consumer Electronics Show at the Las Vegas Hilton in Nevada.

I love the idea of electric cars. But I wasn't enamored with the Ford Focus Electric.

I drove the Focus Electric for three days this past week. During that time, I commuted to and from work, ran errands and made a trip up to San Francisco. In other words, I used it much like I would my own [Prius](#).

I found a lot to like about the [car](#). It's well built. Features like a

navigation system, keyless door locks and a high-end sound system come standard. And while it's more expensive than a similarly appointed gas-powered Focus, the difference after federal and state rebates isn't outrageous.

But other than its all-electric powertrain, there's little about the Focus Electric that stands out. And the car offers practical problems - many shared with other [electric vehicles](#) - that can be hard to accept.

In designing the Focus Electric, Ford took a different route than Tesla. Instead of designing a car to be an electric vehicle from the ground up, it took an existing car and dropped an electric powertrain into it.

Thanks to that approach, the Focus Electric doesn't look like an [alternative fuel](#) car. Instead, it's a near-replica of the gas-powered Focus on the inside and out. So if your big concern about having an electric vehicle is that it will look weird or like some kind of glorified golf cart, the Focus Electric should put that worry to rest.

The problem with Ford's approach is that it had to shoehorn the electric system into the existing nooks and crannies of the Focus. In Nissan's Leaf and Tesla Model S, the battery pack is underneath the seats. In the Focus Electric, it's wedged into the [storage space](#) behind the rear seats.

As a result, the Focus Electric has 9 cubic feet less [storage capacity](#) in that space than does its gas-powered sibling. You can still fit your groceries in there - but not a lot more.

Similarly, Ford placed the Focus Electric's motor in the front of the car. In fact, when you open the hood, it almost looks like you have a regular gas engine in there. Unlike the Model S, the Focus Electric doesn't have what [Tesla](#) likes to call a "frunk," for front trunk.

Like other [electric cars](#), Ford's vehicle has constant acceleration. Because it doesn't have gears, it accelerates from a standstill or at speed without pausing to shift. It's no race car - or even a Model S - but that instant power can feel like a rocket ship.

But the car sometimes felt as out of control as a rocket ship. When reversing, pressing on the accelerator can cause the car to lurch backward much more rapidly than a gas-powered car. And gunning the accelerator at a light sometimes seemed to cause it to veer to one side or another. It reminded me a bit of when I was a teenager and would drive my parents' '66 Mustang with its loosey-goosey power steering.

That said, the Focus Electric's driving quirks are ones to which an owner would likely grow accustomed over time.

Ford has been on mission lately to embrace technology, and the Focus Electric is part of that move. You can download an iPhone app - sorry, no Android version yet - that will tell you where the car is at any point in time and how much of a charge it has. The app also allows you to start the car remotely and send over driving directions to the car's [navigation system](#).

Like other Ford vehicles, the Focus Electric comes with the MyFord Touch touch-screen console system. I had some of the same frustrations with it as I had when I tested the system earlier this year. It's frequently slow to respond to taps and often does a poor job of speech recognition, particularly of addresses. While driving around San Francisco trying find a charging station, I felt like punching the system, because I couldn't get it to search nearby; instead, it kept showing me charging stations in Brisbane.

That's a problem because, like many electric vehicles, the Focus Electric has very limited range. The EPA says it will go about 76 miles on a

charge, but that can vary widely depending on traffic conditions, how you drive and whether you are running energy draining things like the air conditioner. I frequently found myself intensely focused on the car's range estimator and always thinking about where and when I would next charge the car.

Adding to my unease, the Focus Electric's range estimator was often wildly inaccurate. My drive home from San Francisco was about 52 miles, but the range remaining on the meter decreased by only about 41 miles. On the flip side, when I left home the next day, the range estimator said I had 92 miles of charge. But after going less than 19 miles, it said I'd already bled off 31 miles of charge.

So you can take those range estimates with a grain of salt. They're kind of like the warning light you get in some cars when you start to run low on gas. You don't really know how much farther you can go. That ambiguity can be stressful, because recharging stations for an electric car are much harder to find than plain gas stations.

One other shortcoming of the Focus Electric in terms of its charging is that it doesn't support rapid-charge technology. You can recharge it from empty in about 14 hours from a regular outlet or in about 4 hours from a 240V outlet. But you can't plug it into one of the new fast-charging stations that are starting to open.

Those kinds of frustrations would lead me to pass on the Focus Electric. It's not a bad car, but I'm holding out for something better.

FORD FOCUS ELECTRIC:

-Troy's rating: 7.0 (Out of 10)

-Likes: Well built; navigation, nine-speaker sound system come standard;

quick acceleration; iPhone app shows car location, charge and allows for remote start

-Dislikes: More expensive than comparable gas-powered model; limited range; small storage space; inaccurate range gauge; slow console system; poor voice recognition; no fast-charge capability

-Specs: 92 kilowatt electric motor; 23 kilowatt-hour, 76-mile range [battery pack](#); cloth interior; 17-inch wheels

-Price: \$39,200 before taxes, fees and rebates

-On the Web: ford.com

More information: Troy Wolverton is a technology columnist for the San Jose Mercury News.

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