



Political and Geostrategic **OBSERVATORY** of the United States

THE AFFORDABILITY TRAP

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A few weeks ago, when Donald Trump and Zohran Mamdani met at the White House, Trump praised Mamdani for his focus on affordability and indicated it would be a priority for him as well. Trump again spoke awkwardly about groceries as key to affordability. “The new word is affordability. Another word, it’s just groceries. It’s sort of an old-fashioned word, but it’s very accurate.” Trump seems to suggest the words groceries and affordability mean the same thing. They don’t, but perhaps the President can be excused for this mistake because it is very likely he has never shopped for his own groceries.

Earlier this week, Trump shifted course sharply and pronounced “this fake narrative that the Democrats talk about, affordability. They just say the word. It doesn’t mean anything to anybody... The word affordability’s a con job by the Democrats.”

Trump’s comments are nonsense. Affordability is a major, and very legitimate, concern for most Americans. Framing the battery of problems, high costs of health, housing and education, inflation, stagnant wages and more with the word affordability is a new approach, for which Mamdani deserves a great deal of credit, but the problem itself is, unfortunately, very real and for many Americans, quite enduring.

The salience of the affordability crisis has led many Democratic strategists, pundits, kibitzers and the like to begin to perceive it as a magic bullet for 2026 and beyond. Although Trump’s comments above are absurd, a fair amount of Democratic thinking seems to echo his notion that all Democrats have to do is say the word affordability enough and they will win any election. It is almost as if they believe in an affordability spell, where if they whisper the word three times and click their heels, they (we) will no longer be in MAGAland anymore.

The problem with that thinking is that affordability can quickly become like the weather. Everybody talks about it but nobody can do much about it. Trump’s comments about affordability, while reflecting the anger, partisanship and bizarre syntax that is part of his brand, are also a product of his frustration with failing to do anything about affordability during his now almost year back in office.

Some of Trump’s policies, notably his tariffs, are exactly what not to do to make things more affordable, but that notwithstanding it remains true that curbing inflation, bringing prices down and making people feel their lives have become affordable is extremely difficult. Next year, New York’s new mayor will likely experience this as well, although he is unlikely to descend into the semi-madness that has come to define Trump.

Even if Mamdani achieves his goals of freezing rent for some tenants, making it free to ride the bus and establishing a subsidized grocery store in every borough, it will have little effect on the lives of most New Yorkers. Mamdani is not going to be able to eliminate education and healthcare related debt or make housing cheaper for the majority of New Yorkers who do not live in rent regulated units.

That is not meant as a criticism of Mamdani's vision regarding affordability, but a reminder of how challenging it will be for one mayor to push back against decades of predatory economic policies, hollowing out of the social safety and one-sided class warfare waged the part of the wealthiest Americans.

The task the Democrats face around affordability over the next year, and not just in Mamdani's New York, is both to bring prices down in cities and states where they govern and to persuade the American people that their solutions are better than those of the Trump administration's. This is not going to be easy, but it will become even more difficult if the Trump administration begins to focus on affordability as well.

The Democratic hope seems that by 2026 voters are so upset about affordability that they will turn away from the GOP in massive enough numbers that the MAGA project collapses. This is not going to happen, in part because as the affordability crisis continues voters will, as is usually the case, become angry at both parties. Moreover, if winning elections were as simple as showing how the other party's economic policies cause economic distress, we would not be in a very different political world today.

By mid-2026, the most likely scenario is that affordability will still be a major problem and voters will have already tired of politicians claiming to make it a priority while failing to deliver. This will lead directly back to the politics of most of the last decade.

That does not mean the Democrats will lose in 2026. It will still likely be a Democratic year, but affordability will not be the secret bullet that brings down the MAGA movement. It is more likely to be a theme that will lose some political punch over the coming months. It is true that American elections are almost always about the economy, and affordability is a key component of that, but that does not mean that Americans will put aside all the other reasons they vote, including the reasons they vote for Trump, simply because Democrats repeat the word affordability more frequently.

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