THE AFFORDABILITY WAR

How politicians turn household pain into political power - and what a $12.54 chicken package reveals

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WHEN A POLITICIAN PROMISES TO ORDER PRICES DOWN, DO NOT APPLAUD.
ASK WHO WILL BE FORCED TO PAY.

THE CHARGE: The Affordability War exploits real hardship. Politicians show the price, hide how it was built, blame the federal administration, and promise a lower number without naming the worker, business, investor, or taxpayer who will absorb it.

Executive Summary: Affordability Is Being Weaponized

This essay makes a direct charge: a real cost-of-living crisis is being turned into an Affordability War for political power. The method is simple. Show the public a painful price. Hide the people, work, capital, taxes, and risk inside it. Blame the political opponent. Then promise that a stronger government can force the number down.

That promise is false unless the politician names the payer. Government can reduce the number printed on a shelf by taxing someone else, subsidizing the sale, squeezing wages and service, forcing losses on producers, or driving suppliers from the market. It cannot repeal the cost of feed, labor, processing, refrigeration, transport, rent, insurance, or capital. The unpaid part returns somewhere else.

The affordability crisis is real. In my earlier analysis of a New York City family with two adults, two children, and minimum-wage employment, essential expenses exceeded one working parent's income by $1,817 a month before rent. Even with both parents working, paid childcare left the family $1,540 short before rent.[8] That family needs an honest solution. It does not need its hardship converted into a campaign weapon.

The chicken package in this essay is only the illustration. Open its $12.54 price and the slogan collapses into one adult question: Which real cost will be removed, or who will be forced to pay it? Nobody gets a moral license to hide that answer because voters are angry. A politician who avoids it is not explaining affordability. That politician is exploiting it.

A Price Is Not Affordability

A price tells us what a product costs. Affordability tells us whether a family can pay after rent, childcare, healthcare, transportation, and taxes. An apartment cannot be built, financed, heated, maintained, insured, and taxed for nothing. Yet the family in my earlier analysis had no practical room for rent in some scenarios. That did not prove the apartment price was dishonest. It proved the household budget was broken.

The same distinction applies at the grocery shelf. A product can be unaffordable without being unfairly priced. That is not a defense of every price. If there is collusion, gouging, fraud, monopoly abuse, or waste, expose it. But a family's pain is not, by itself, proof that someone stole the money.

Open the Chicken Package

Take a three-pound family package of boneless, skinless chicken breasts. In June 2026, the U.S. city-average price was $4.181 per pound, or $12.54 for the package.[1] This is ordinary food, not a luxury, and $12.54 matters in a weekly budget.

Now look at the history the campaign slogan leaves out. The same package cost $9.68 in June 2016, reached $14.24 in September 2022, and fell to $12.54 by June 2026.[1] Over ten years, its price rose 29.5 percent while the Consumer Price Index rose 38.6 percent.[2] Against the general price level, the chicken was 6.5 percent cheaper than it had been ten years earlier.

$12.54 still hurts. But this package is a terrible campaign witness against the current federal administration. It is below its 2022 peak and rose less than overall prices across the decade. The honest question is what built the price. The political question is whom voters can be taught to blame. This essay draws that line.

The Chain They Hide

The chicken does not begin at the supermarket. Farmers buy feed and chicks, maintain barns and equipment, manage disease, and care for the birds. Processors slaughter, inspect, chill, cut, clean, weigh, and seal the meat. Packaging suppliers make the tray, pad, film, label, and cases. Refrigerated warehouses and trucks keep it safe. The store receives it, keeps it cold, stocks it, absorbs spoilage and theft, processes payment, and pays people to do the work.

The package looks simple because the chain has done its job well enough to disappear from view. The political trick is to keep it invisible. Show only the final seller. Call the gap between farm and shelf 'greed.' Let the public imagine a giant profit that the numbers do not contain.

The $12.54 Chicken Price: Actor by Actor

Here is the $12.54 package, opened from farm to checkout. The price and labor shares come from USDA data; profit is estimated from industry margins.[3]-[7] The exact cents vary by brand and store. The structure does not.

Actor	What they do	Share of price	Worker pay	Estimated profit
Farm, feed mill, hatchery	Raise birds; supply feed and chicks	$2.60	$0.97	$0.20
Meat processor	Process, inspect, chill, cut, clean	$2.73	$0.87	$0.21
Packaging supplier	Make trays, pads, film, labels, cases	$0.30	$0.10	$0.02
Cold-chain logistics	Store and transport under refrigeration	$0.93	$0.51	$0.07
Wholesale distributor	Warehouse and distribute to stores	$0.56	$0.30	$0.04
Grocery store	Receive, refrigerate, stock, sell; absorb losses	$4.11	$2.26	$0.26

Actor	What they do	Share of price	Worker pay	Estimated profit
Energy suppliers	Supply electricity and fuel	$0.44	$0.10	$0.03
Business and support services	Finance, insurance, legal, accounting, advertising	$0.87	$0.39	$0.07
TOTAL PACKAGE	**Complete farm-to-checkout chain**	**$12.54**	**$5.52**	**$0.91**

ERASE ALL PROFIT: A 20 percent cut sets the price at $10.03. Remove the entire $0.91 of estimated profit and the package still costs $11.63. The missing $1.60 must come from workers, safety, service, investment, or taxpayers.

The Profit Myth

The table does not say every company is innocent or efficient. It destroys the central fiction: there is no profit pool large enough to fund the promised cut. The grocery store's $4.11 share is not $4.11 of profit. It includes $2.26 in worker pay, plus the building, refrigeration, equipment, taxes, spoilage, losses, and capital needed to keep the store open.[3][4] The store's after-tax profit is 26 cents.[5]

The same distortion is used against the farmer. Calling the farmer's $2.60 share 'income' ignores feed, chicks, barns, energy, insurance, debt, equipment, and mortality. Calling every return on capital 'profit' pretends that land, plants, trucks, refrigeration, inventory, and replacement equipment arrive free. They do not.

Profits exist. Some are too high. Some executives are overpaid. Some markets are concentrated. When there is abuse, prove it and punish it. But shouting 'greed' instead of opening the books is not courage. It is camouflage.

Now Demand the Cut

Demand a 20 percent cut. The $12.54 package must sell for $10.03, a reduction of $2.51. Remove the store's 26-cent profit. Remove the remaining 65 cents of estimated profit across the chain. The package still costs $11.63. Another $1.60 must be taken from somewhere.

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO CUT?

Feed? Wages? Food safety? Refrigeration? Delivery? Store staff?
Or should taxpayers pay the missing $1.60?

This is the question the Affordability War tries to keep offstage. 'They must lower prices' sounds compassionate only while 'they' stays faceless. Open the chain and the slogan becomes a cut in wages, service, safety, investment, or a new tax bill. Someone pays.

Washington Cannot Sign Away a Cost

Federal policy matters. Energy, taxes, tariffs, regulation, antitrust enforcement, fiscal policy, and the monetary environment all affect prices. Any administration should be held responsible for costs it causes. But trace the cause through the chain. Do not use a painful price tag as proof.

No president can sign an order that makes feed, labor, refrigeration, freight, insurance, rent, spoilage, or capital stop costing money. Government can order the printed price down. A socialist government may do it eagerly. A dictatorship may do it overnight. But economics does not obey a press conference, an executive order, or a campaign slogan.

Force the selling price below the cost of supply and the unpaid part returns as a subsidy, shortage, wage cut, weaker service, poorer quality, deferred maintenance, lost investment, closed store, black market, or later price surge. The order moves the damage. It does not remove it.

Blaming the federal administration for every painful shelf price while hiding how that price was built is not analysis. It is a political tactic. When the same people then offer more government power as the cure, the tactic becomes a bid for control.

One Illustration: The Municipal Store

Mayor Zohran Mamdani's N.Y.C. Groceries plan is one illustration, not the subject of this essay. The city plans five municipally owned stores, run day to day by private grocers, with a core basket that includes chicken priced 30 percent below normal retail and available to everyone regardless of income.[9] Our $12.54 package would carry an $8.78 shelf price. The shopper would save $3.76.

The store's average profit is 26 cents, not $3.76. The official plan shows where the rest comes from: $70 million in city capital funding, grocery-ready sites, paid rent and property taxes, initial construction, and possible continuing operating support.[9][10] The price on the shelf falls because part of the cost leaves the shelf and enters the city budget. That may be an openly chosen subsidy. It is not cheaper chicken.

Five stores are not communism. They are a socialist instrument inside a capitalist economy: public ownership, politically set discounts, exemption from costs paid by private competitors, and taxpayer support for the gap. The political trick is to display the subsidized price as proof that government cares, while the full price at a private store is offered as proof that business exploits. The comparison is rigged.

If the city finds a more efficient way to buy, handle, and sell food, publish the full accounting and let every store copy it. If taxpayers cover the gap, call it a subsidy. Hiding the transfer and claiming victory over greed is deception, not compassion.

The Capitalist Answer: Attack the Real Cost

Free-market capitalism does not require us to worship companies. It requires companies to compete, improve, justify their prices, and lose customers when someone else does the job better. The capitalist answer is not to defend $12.54 forever. It is to strip out every real, removable cost without pretending that necessary work is greed.

A real market solution starts with more supply and more competition. Make it easier for discount grocers, warehouse stores, independent supermarkets, cooperatives, and new distribution models to enter underserved neighborhoods. Cut needless zoning barriers, permit delays, taxes, and delivery restrictions for every qualified competitor, not just politically selected stores. Enforce antitrust law when concentration, collusion, or abuse is proved. Press businesses to reduce spoilage, improve inventory and refrigeration, and automate where it saves money without destroying service. Let inefficient companies fail.

New York's FRESH program comes closer to that approach. It uses zoning and tax incentives to attract private supermarkets into underserved areas.[11] It has a public cost and should disclose it. But the purpose is to bring in more capital and more sellers, not to make government the owner and advertise a subsidized shelf price as the market price.

When productivity removes a dollar, the product truly costs less. When competition removes a dollar, the product truly costs less. When an unnecessary tax or rule is removed, the product truly costs less. Those savings do not reappear in a hidden public account.

Strengthen the Family Instead of Faking the Price

Some families will still be unable to afford necessities even in a competitive market. Help them directly and say what it costs. Targeted food benefits, refundable tax credits, or income support preserve choice and force private stores to compete for each dollar. A universal discount at a subsidized store gives public support to people who may not need it and can weaken nearby stores that pay their own rent, taxes, and capital costs.

Most important, fix the whole household budget. Housing, childcare, healthcare, transportation, and taxes can drain a family's income before groceries are bought. A cheaper chicken package helps, but it cannot make an insolvent budget solvent. Find the burden that is breaking the family and attack it directly. Do not select one visible price, stage an execution, and call it policy.

The housing analysis begins with the family's wallet. The chicken analysis begins with the product price. Together they show what the word affordability cannot tell us: why the family is short. The product may be overpriced. The family may lack income. Government may have loaded costs into housing, energy, transport, childcare, or business operation. Honest policy finds the cause. Political propaganda skips the diagnosis and points at an enemy.

Conclusion: Do Not Reward the Manipulation

Affordability pain deserves an honest solution. It must never become permission to hide costs, invent villains, or promise that government can repeal arithmetic. If a price is abusive, prove it. If competition is weak, open the market. If a family lacks purchasing power, repair the family budget. If government subsidizes a price, publish the taxpayer's share.

Do not accept a shelf price as a campaign poster. Demand the whole chain, the full profit, the full subsidy, and the exact link between a policy and a price. Politicians who refuse to show those things are not asking the public to understand. They are asking the public to stop asking questions.

The choice is not between compassion and capitalism. It is between honest solutions and political manipulation. Compassion without truth becomes bait. Affordability without accounting becomes a slogan. And a slogan that hides the payer, blames the opponent, and promises impossible prices is not economic policy. It is a claim to more power.

Lower the real cost. Strengthen the family. Or name the payer.

Hide the payer, blame the opponent, and promise the impossible:

THAT IS NOT AFFORDABILITY. IT IS A POWER GRAB.

Sources and Notes

[1] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Average Price: Chicken Breast, Boneless, U.S. City Average, monthly series APU0000FF1101, accessed through FRED. Source

[2] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, CPI-U historical table and June 2026 CPI release. June index: 241.018 in 2016 and 333.952 in 2026, not seasonally adjusted. Source

[3] U.S. Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, 2024 Poultry at Home Food Dollar account, Xf1106, released in 2026. Source

[4] USDA ERS, Food Dollar documentation, definitions, methods, strengths, and limitations. Source

[5] FMI, The Food Retailing Industry Speaks 2026. Average food-retailer after-tax profit for 2025: 2.1 percent. Source

[6] FMI, The Food Retailing Industry Speaks 2025. Broad food-product supplier net income for 2024: 7.7 percent. Used to estimate supplier profit in the table; it is not a measured margin for this package. Source

[7] Illustrative small-wholesale meat-tray and absorbent-pad listings. Used to estimate a separate $0.30 packaging share; large processors may pay different prices. Source

[8] Companion analysis: Lev Neymotin, 'NYC Minimum Wage and Affordability' (2026), family-of-four model. The present essay uses only its conclusions needed to distinguish household solvency from product pricing.

[9] New York City Mayor's Office, N.Y.C. Groceries announcement, July 27, 2026: five municipal stores, private operators, 30 percent discounts on a core basket including chicken, and $70 million in capital funding. Source

[10] New York City Economic Development Corporation, N.Y.C. Groceries program and Operator RFP: city-provided sites, rent and property-tax coverage, initial buildout, and possible continuing operating support. Program Operator RFP

[11] New York City Economic Development Corporation, Food Retail Expansion to Support Health, FRESH: zoning and tax incentives for private supermarket development in underserved communities. Source

Method note: Dollar values are rounded, so individual rows may not sum perfectly. BLS supplies the national price. USDA supplies national poultry price and labor shares. Processing and packaging are separated for clarity; their combined totals remain unchanged. Profit is estimated from FMI supplier and retailer margins. This is a national illustration, not one company's invoice.