August 27, 2026

2026 Midterm Elections (4)

68 Days Out: The Democrats' Drift Over Affordability Problems

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Election Dashboard

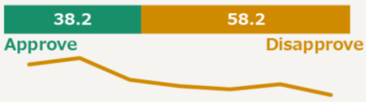
Bottom line Voters lean Democratic, Republicans lead on money; in the House ratings, two more Republican-held seats (FL-14, MI-10) moved to Toss-up, widening the field to 21.

Presidential approval

Net, approve minus disapprove

–20.0

Near 2nd-term low



Silver Bulletin avg · Aug 26 · line since Feb

Generic congressional ballot

National polling average

D +6.6

Democrats lead

Peak D+7.1 (Jun) → D+5.9 (Jul) → steady

Silver Bulletin avg · Aug 26 · line since Feb

Gas price, national average

Regular grade, AAA

$4.10

Up 28% y/y

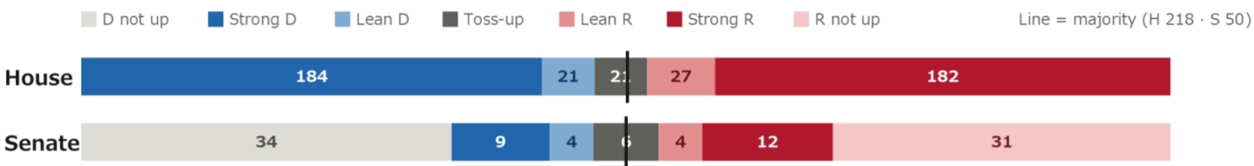
Mid-Jan $2.83; spiked on the Iran war

AAA · Aug 27 · line since Feb

House and Senate race ratings

NEW: House 8/25: FL-14 & MI-10 → Toss-up (19→21)

Cook Political Report

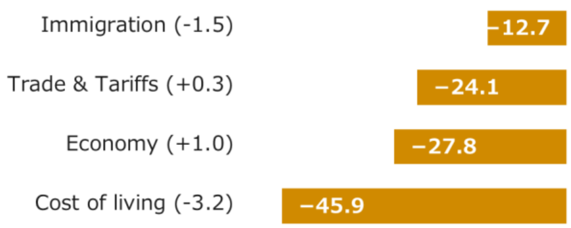


All 435 House seats and 35 Senate seats are up this year, incl. two specials (FL, OH).

Last updated: Senate 8/20, House 8/25

Approval by issue area

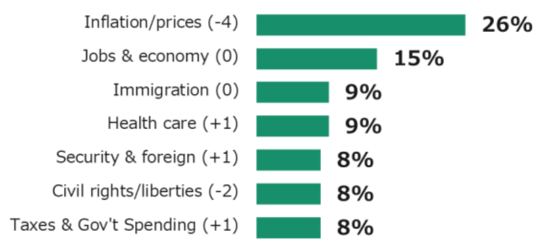
Net, Silver Bulletin



( ) denotes change from last update
Issue-area averages · Aug 26

Voters' most important issue

Economist/YouGov



( ) = change vs. last update ·Aug 21-24 · registered voters

Party committee cash on hand (six national committees)

FEC filings

DCCC $80.2M · DSCC $39.9M · DNC $16.1M
RNC $130.4M · NRCC $92.4M · NRSC $56.2M

Through Jul 31, 2026

*For each party, the total combines the national committees (DNC/RNC), House campaign committees (DCCC/NRCC), and Senate campaign committees (DSCC/NRSC). Republicans hold roughly twice as much. The DNC separately reports $17.9 million in debt.

Next up Next major primary: Sep 1 Massachusetts, Sep 8 New Hampshire. **Election Day: Tue, Nov 3 · 68 days out**

Sources: Silver Bulletin (approval, generic ballot) · Cook Political Report (ratings) · Economist/YouGov (top issue) · AAA · FEC

Prepared Aug 27, 2026

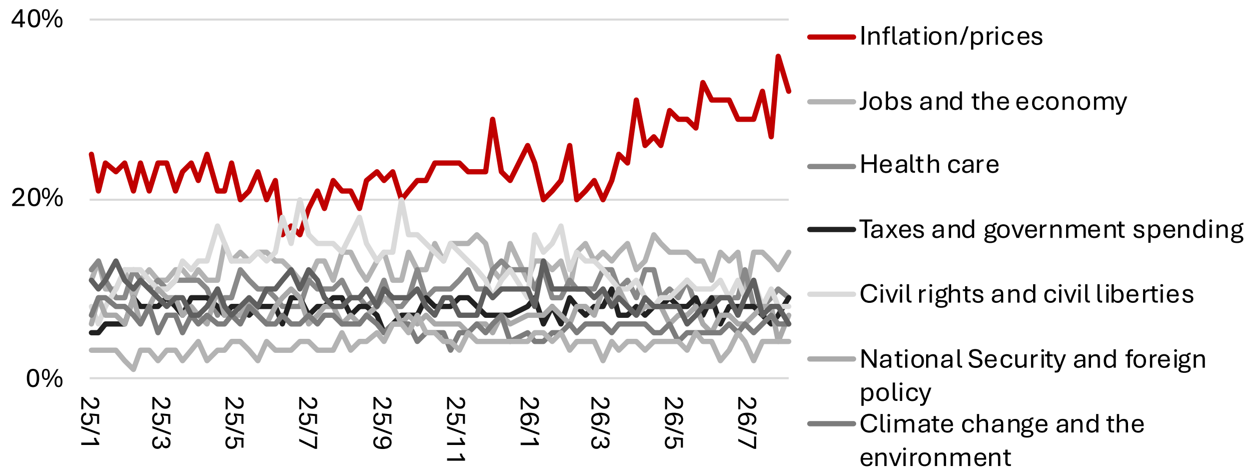
- Affordability emerged as an important political issue following Democratic victories in the off-year elections of November 2025. However, Democrats have yet to articulate a unified policy agenda on affordability, preventing them from building momentum ahead of the midterm elections.
- Public opinion polls, media coverage, and congressional debates all indicate that affordability remains a key policy concern. At the same time, economic data suggest that the problem continues to worsen in the real economy.
- The differences between moderate Democrats and the progressive wing led by the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), if they remain unresolved, could pose a greater risk in the 2028 presidential election than in the midterm elections, where candidates are generally allowed to run more individual, localized campaigns.

1. Is "Affordability" the Most Important Issue ahead of the Midterm Elections?

"Affordability" is frequently cited as one of the most important issues in the November midterm elections. Survey data largely support this view. In the Economist/YouGov poll tracking voters' most important issues, "inflation/prices," which is closely tied to affordability, has consistently ranked as the top concern among respondents. The share selecting this issue has risen even further since March, when inflationary pressures resurfaced following the Iran war.[1]

Similarly, Gallup's long-running survey on the most important problem facing the United States shows that affordability-related concerns have remained prominent throughout the year. Issues such as the high cost of living/inflation, fuel and oil prices, income inequality, wage-related concerns, and poverty, hunger, and homelessness accounted for roughly 20 to 40 percent of responses between January and July. These concerns have consistently ranked alongside dissatisfaction with government or a lack of leadership (around 30 percent) and immigration (around 10 percent) as major public concerns. While voters may focus on different aspects of the issue, these polling results suggest that affordability is unquestionably a central theme in both the current election cycle and contemporary U.S. politics more broadly.[2]

Figure 1: Public Opinion Poll on Voters' Most Important Issues



[1] https://yougov.com/en-us/trackers/most-important-issues-facing-the-us
[2] https://news.gallup.com/poll/1675/most-important-problem.aspx

Note: Only issues accounting for more than 4 percent of responses are shown.
Source: The Economist; YouGov.

Affordability became a political buzzword following the so-called off-year elections of November 2025.[3] In those contests, Democratic candidates Abigail Spanberger, Mikie Sherrill, and Zohran Mamdani each secured victories in campaigns that prominently featured affordability as a core message, running respectively for Governor of Virginia, Governor of New Jersey, and Mayor of New York City. Inspired by these successes, Democrats increasingly embraced affordability as a political rallying cry.

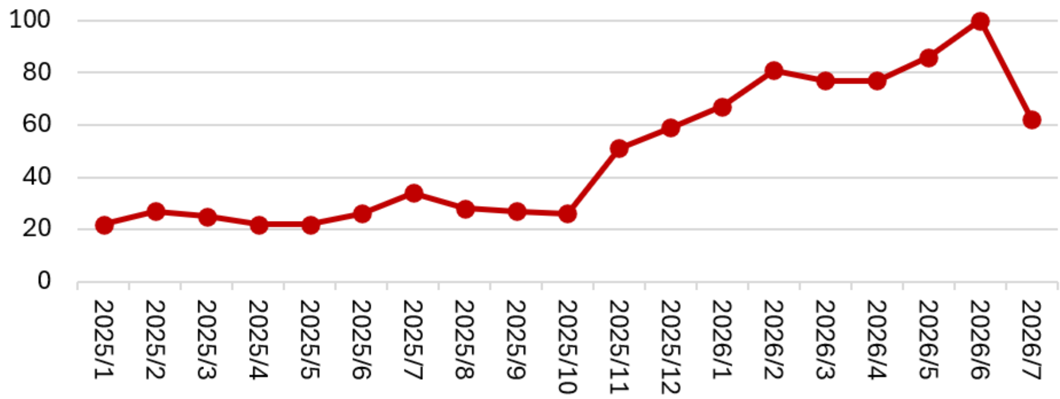
The momentum quickly extended into policy argument. On November 20, the progressive Democratic organization Groundwork Collaborative released a policy document outlining ten affordability-focused initiatives. This was followed by a series of similar proposals from organizations both within and outside the Democratic Party, helping to deepen policy debate around the issue.[4] For Democrats, affordability appeared to be an especially attractive political issue because public frustration over rising living costs could be directed toward the governing party and its economic policies.

The question, however, is whether Democrats have been able to translate the affordability issue into sufficient political momentum to shape the outcome of the midterm elections. The short answer is not yet. Despite remaining a significant concern in the real economy and continuing to attract substantial attention from voters and the media, Democrats have thus far struggled to make affordability a defining issue of the campaign.

The following sections reexamine the current state of the affordability debate through trends in public attention and key economic indicators. They also explore why Democrats have not fully capitalized on affordability as a political issue and consider how this failure could create risks not only for the upcoming midterm elections but also for the party's prospects beyond them.

2. Affordability as a Political Issue: Search Interest, Media Coverage, and Congress

Figure 2: Google Trends for "Affordability"



3 https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2026/02/16/affordability-politics-cost-living-prices/
4 https://groundworkcollaborative.org/news/new-resource-outlines-how-elected-officials-can-fight-for-affordability-for-all/

Note: Relative search interest in the United States, where the highest level of interest during the past five years is indexed to 100. Scores are measured as a share of total searches at a given point in time.
Source: Google Trends

One useful indicator of public interest in affordability is online search activity. According to Google Trends data for the United States, search interest in the term "affordability" has been on an upward trajectory since late 2025, reaching a record high in June 2026.

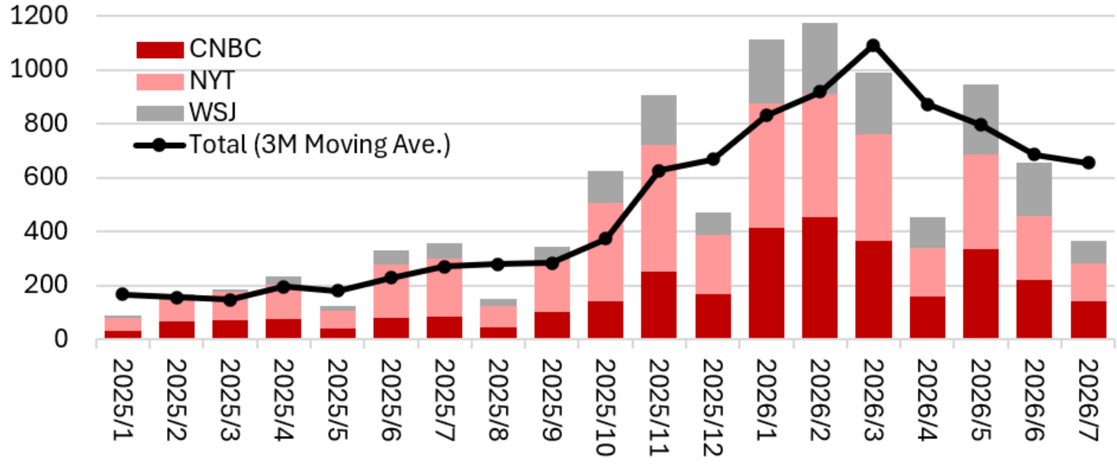
Many of the associated search terms are housing-related, such as housing affordability, home affordability, and mortgage affordability. This is not surprising, given that affordability has long been a commonly used term in discussions of housing markets. Another notable category of search activity relates to the 2026 FIFA World Cup, likely reflecting concerns over rising ticket prices. This appears to have been one factor driving increased search volumes through June.

The subsequent decline in July may have reflected a combination of factors, including a reversal in energy prices following a temporary easing of tensions in the Middle East and the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court's ruling in late June that invalidated a proposed rent-control referendum as unconstitutional. Even after this decline, however, search interest remained well above levels seen prior to late 2025. Although search data must be interpreted with caution, given the diversity of search intentions, overall interest in the concept of affordability appears to have remained elevated.[5]

To gauge the degree of media attention devoted to affordability, it is also useful to examine how the issue has been covered by major news organizations. For reference, monthly counts were compiled of online articles mentioning the term "affordability" in CNBC, The New York Times (NYT), and The Wall Street Journal (WSJ).

While the number of articles naturally varies across media outlets, several patterns are evident. First, coverage rose sharply around the turn of the year. Second, although there are signs that attention may have peaked in recent months, the volume of coverage remains significantly higher than it was throughout most of the previous year.

Figure 3: Media Coverage of "Affordability" (CNBC, NYT, WSJ; Number of Articles)



[5] https://trends.google.com/trends/

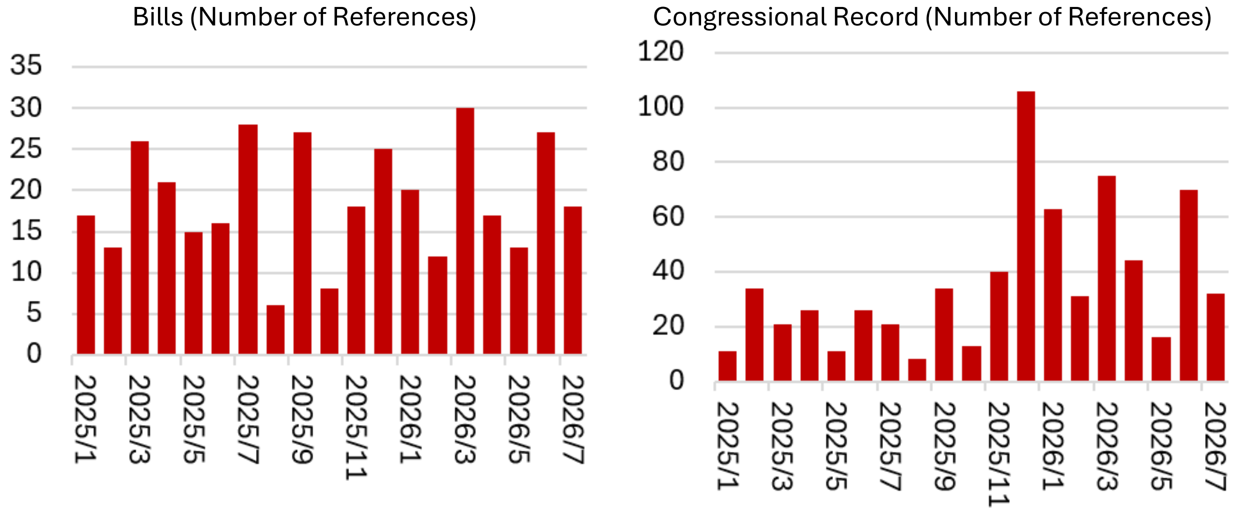
Note: Number of online articles in which the term "affordability" appeared in either the title or body text.
Source: CNBC, NYT, WSJ

How, then, is affordability being treated in Congress, where policy debates ultimately take place?

As an objective measure, data from Congress.gov, the federal government's legislative information portal, were used to count the number of bills (Legislation) and congressional statements (Congressional Record) containing references to affordability. Seasonal factors such as congressional recess periods should be taken into account when interpreting the results. Nevertheless, the data reveal several noteworthy trends.

For legislation, there has been no major shift in activity compared with the previous year. References to affordability in introduced bills have remained relatively stable. In contrast, references within the Congressional Record rose sharply, peaking in December of last year, and have remained elevated since then. This suggests that affordability continues to occupy a prominent place in congressional debate even in the absence of a corresponding increase in legislative proposals.

Figure 4: Congressional Attention to "Affordability" (Bills and Congressional Record)



Note: Number of search results for "affordability" within the "Legislation" and "Congressional Record" databases on Congress.gov. Bills are categorized by date of introduction.
Source: Congress.gov

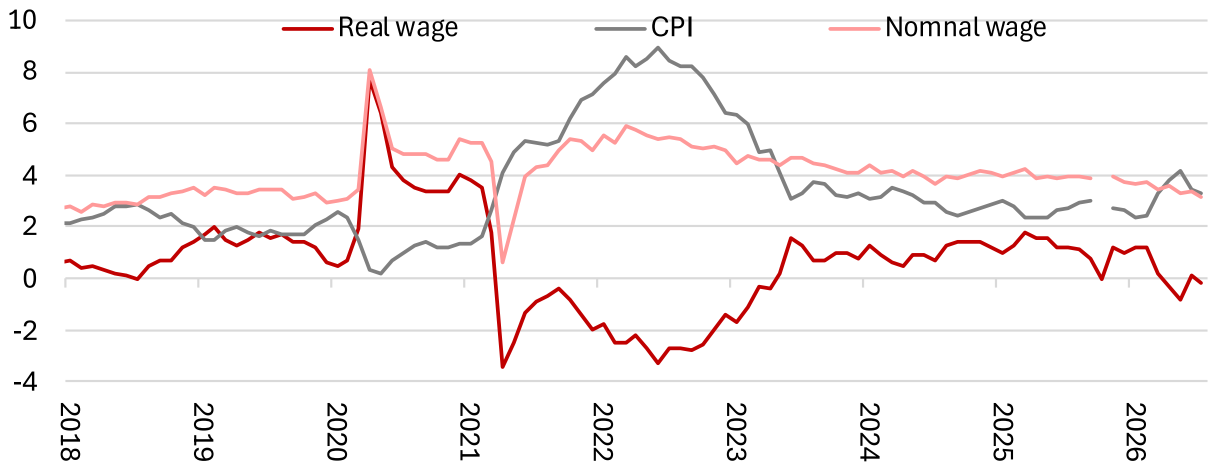
Taken together, these indicators suggest that while public attention to affordability may have peaked around the end of last year in some areas, the issue continues to attract substantial attention from both the media and Congress. These findings are also broadly consistent with the polling data discussed in the previous section. As such, affordability remains an important issue in American politics and society, even if the intensity of interest has moderated somewhat from its recent highs.

3. Affordability in the Real Economy: Food, Energy, Housing, and Healthcare

What is the current state of the affordability problem in the real economy? In the United States, concerns have long been raised about the emergence of a "K-shaped economy," in which income and wealth disparities between affluent households and everyone else continue to widen. While the economy has remained resilient at the macroeconomic level, many non-wealthy households have continued to face significant financial pressure, a key dimension of the affordability challenge.

Beyond these disparities across income groups, recent months have also begun to reveal signs of mounting financial strain at the aggregate household level. For example, real wages, which measure wage growth after adjusting for inflation, turned negative on a year-over-year basis in April and May for the first time in roughly three years, reflecting inflationary pressures stemming from the deterioration of the situation in the Middle East. Combined with a gradual slowdown in nominal wage growth, this has forced many households to dip into savings to maintain consumption. The fact that signs of household financial stress are now becoming visible even in headline economic indicators marks an important development in the affordability debate.

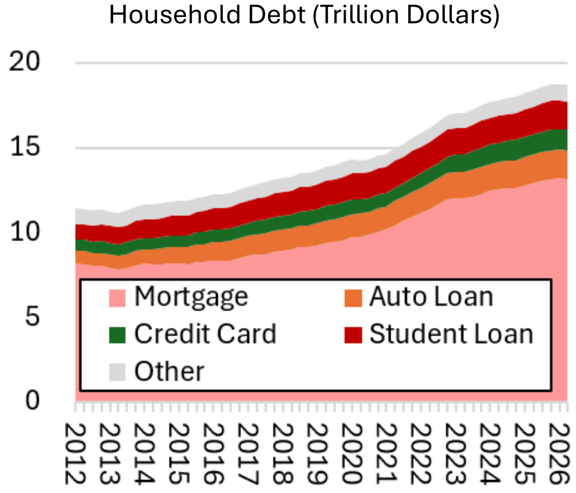
Figure 5: Consumer Price Index, Nominal Wages, and Real Wages (YoY, %)

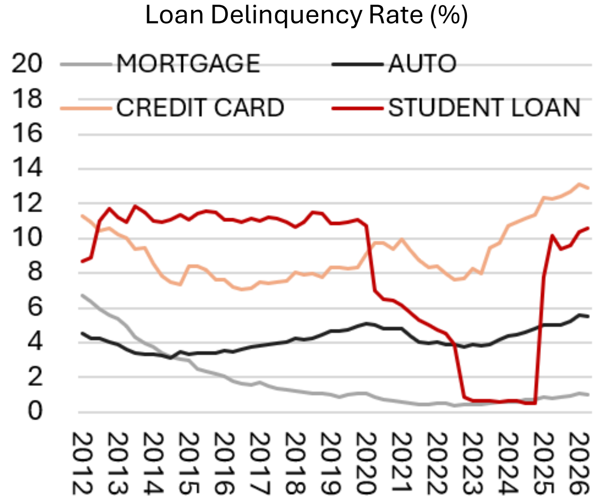


Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)

Household debt rose by 2.1% year-over-year in the second quarter of 2026, down from 3.2% in the previous quarter, while the delinquency rate on outstanding debt edged down slightly to 4.7% from 4.8%. Nevertheless, the longer-term trend of rising household indebtedness remains intact. In particular, concerns have been raised over the spillover effects of student loan repayment obligations. The pandemic-era pause on federal student loan repayments expired in October 2023, and compulsory collection efforts resumed in May 2025 under the second Trump administration. As a result, rising delinquency rates on student loans may also be contributing to higher delinquency rates on other forms of debt, including credit card and auto loans.

Figure 6: Household Debt

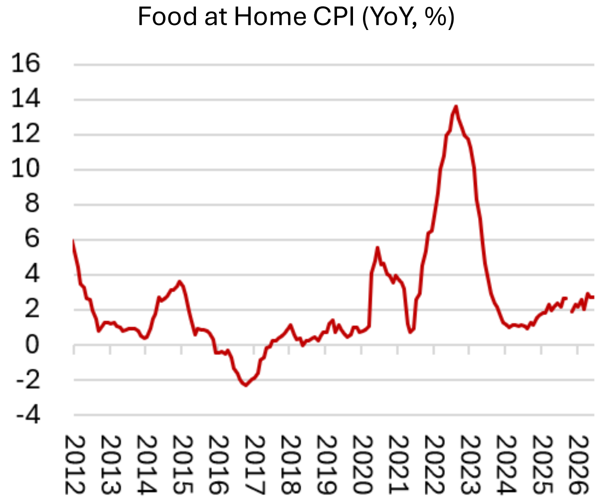


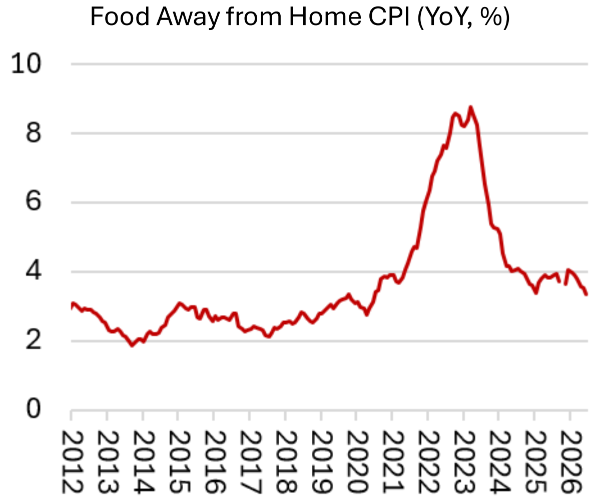


Source: Federal Reserve Bank of New York

Conditions remain challenging across most areas closely associated with affordability. Food prices are a partial exception. After reaching double-digit year-over-year growth rates around 2022, food inflation has moderated to roughly 3%, easing some of the pressure on household budgets. However, the increase in price levels accumulated during the post-pandemic inflation surge has largely become permanent, with little evidence of a reversal. Particularly noteworthy is the continued strength of inflation in food away from home, which has generally outpaced price increases for food consumed at home. As a result, dining out continues to impose a significant burden on household budgets.

Figure 7: Affordability I - Food

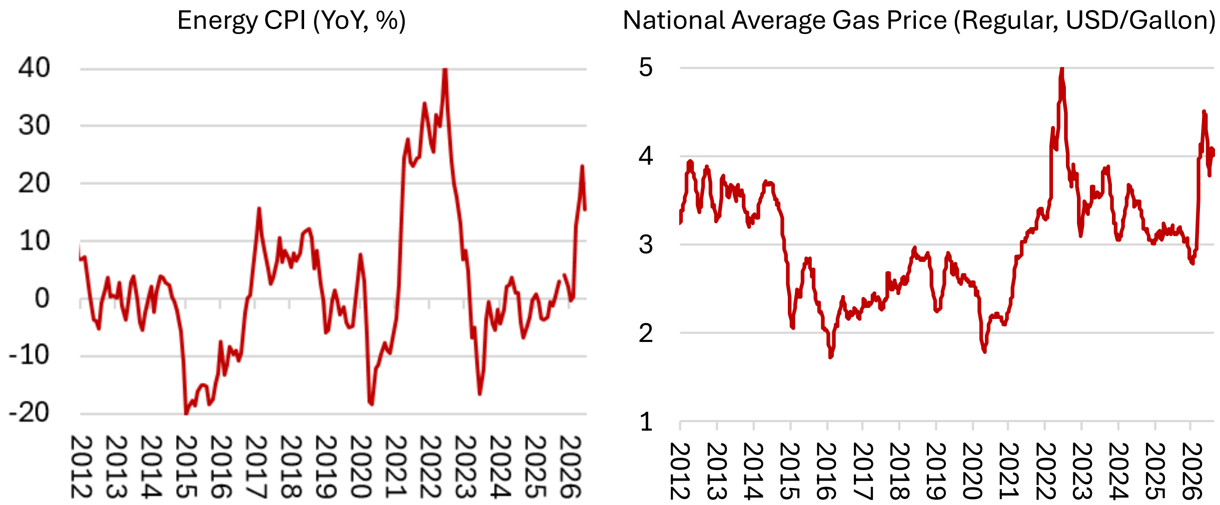




Source: BLS

Energy prices have been hit particularly hard by the deterioration of geopolitical conditions in the Middle East since late February. Inflation in this category has accelerated sharply. Most notably, the national average price of regular gasoline has risen to around $4 per gallon, more than 30% above the approximately $3 per gallon level that prevailed before the conflict began. While gasoline accounts for only around 2 to 3% of total household spending and overall energy expenditures account for roughly 6%, a Federal Reserve working paper published last year found that approximately one in five U.S. households is "energy burdened," meaning that energy expenditures account for an average of 25% of disposable income.[6] For such households, a more than 30% increase in energy prices can dramatically alter spending patterns and financial conditions.

Figure 8: Affordability II - Energy



Source: BLS; Energy Information Administration (EIA)

Housing, which accounts for roughly one-third of household expenditures, remains another major source of affordability concerns. Although the rapid rise in home prices has moderated, 30-year fixed mortgage rates remain above 6%, keeping the effective cost of homeownership elevated.[7] The Atlanta Fed Home Ownership Affordability Monitor, a comprehensive measure of housing affordability, continues to remain well below its historical average, indicating persistent difficulties for prospective homebuyers.[8] According to the newly introduced Homeownership-Population Ratio (HPOP) published by the Minneapolis Fed in July 2026, 53.2% of adults owned a home in 2024, but homeownership rates were significantly lower among younger Americans. Among those under age 35, the homeownership rate stood at just 22%, highlighting the challenges facing younger households.[9] The rental market paints a similarly troubling picture. According to Harvard University's Joint Center for Housing Studies (JCHS), 22.7 million renter households in 2024 were classified as cost burdened, meaning they spent more than 30% of disposable income on rent, the highest level on record. Of these, 12.1 million households faced a severe cost burden, spending more than 50% of their income on rent.[10] As barriers to homeownership rise, younger households that remain in rental housing are particularly vulnerable to these pressures.

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[6] https://www.federalreserve.gov/econres/feds/energy-consumption-and-inequality-in-the-u-s-who-are-the-energy-burdened.htm

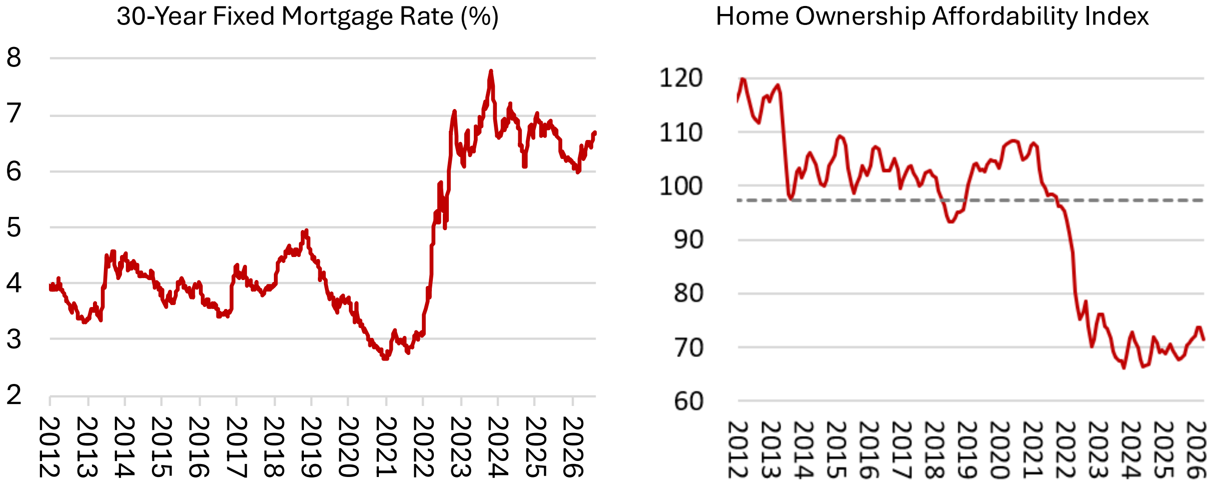
[7] https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/MORTGAGE30US

[8] https://www.atlantafed.org/research-and-data/data/home-ownership-affordability-monitor#tab-5

[9] https://www.minneapolisfed.org/article/2026/new-homeownership-measure-puts-people-first

[10] https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/americas-rental-housing-2026

Figure 9: Affordability III - Housing



Note: The dotted line represents the 2005-19 average. A higher index value indicates greater housing affordability.
Source: Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, FRED

Healthcare costs have emerged as another major affordability concern. At first glance, conventional price indices suggest only modest inflation. The CPI measure for medical care has been rising by roughly 2% year-over-year, while the healthcare-related component of the PCE price index has increased by around 3%, both below overall inflation rates.[11]

However, these measures do not necessarily capture the financial burden experienced by households. The CPI's healthcare component is largely derived from health insurers' profit margins, meaning that increases in out-of-pocket costs resulting from policy changes, such as reductions in Affordable Care Act (ACA) premium tax credits (PTCs), may not be fully reflected. The PCE price index is subject to a different methodological issue, but similarly does not adequately capture changes arising from adjustments to healthcare subsidy programs.[12] Consequently, price indices alone provide an incomplete picture of healthcare affordability.

A more direct measure is the West Health-Gallup Affordability Index, published since 2021 by Gallup and West Health. The survey estimates the share of adults who are “cost secure,” defined as being able to obtain needed healthcare and pay for it without undue hardship.[13]

According to the index, the share of cost-secure adults fell to 49% in 2025, down 7 percentage points from five years earlier and falling below 50% for the first time. The deterioration has been especially

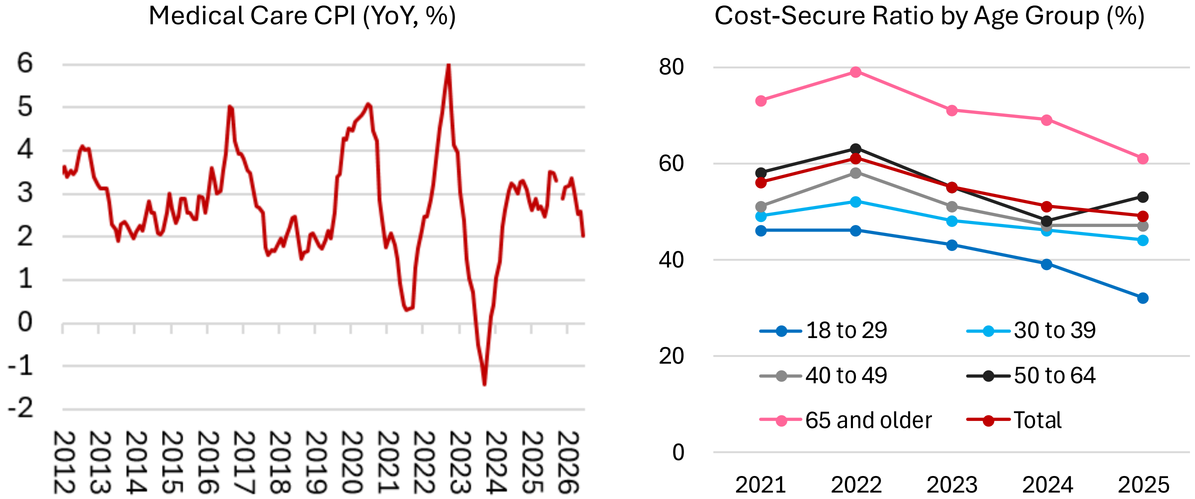
[11] The main difference in how the CPI and the PCE price index measure health care is that CPI only tracks direct, out-of-pocket costs paid by consumers, while PCE also includes third-party payments made on behalf of consumers. https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/CPIMEDSL https://fred.stlouisfed.org/series/CPIMEDSL

[12] https://www.forbes.com/sites/joshuacohen/2026/03/01/consumer-price-index-isnt-properly-accounting-for-healthcare-costs/

[13] https://news.gallup.com/poll/710942/adults-ability-afford-healthcare-five-year-low.aspx

pronounced among young adults aged 18 to 29, among whom 68% report difficulty affording healthcare costs. Because the expanded ACA premium assistance provisions expired at the end of 2025, reducing both coverage generosity and eligibility, the cost-secure ratio is likely to deteriorate further over time.

Figure 10: Affordability IV - Healthcare



Note: The cost-secure ratio represents the share of individuals who can obtain needed healthcare and afford to pay for it without financial hardship.
Source: BLS; Gallup

In summary, the affordability challenge remains severe across the real economy. Although the extraordinary inflation seen during the post-pandemic recovery has subsided, a combination of factors, including slower wage growth, the expiration of household support measures, and the concentration of financial asset gains among higher-income households, continues to place considerable strain on many Americans. Taken together, these developments suggest that affordability remains one of the most significant economic risks facing U.S. households today.

4. Affordability as a Policy Issue: With Democrats Divided, the Midterms Are Increasingly Taking on the Character of Individual Races

Because the affordability issue is closely tied to broader public dissatisfaction with economic conditions, it naturally lends itself to criticism of the governing party. Conversely, for the opposition, merely raising the issue can serve as an effective political attack against those in power. Indeed, many Republicans have sought to downplay the issue. President Trump himself has reportedly mocked affordability concerns as a Democratic "hoax," reflecting a broader tendency within the Republican camp to minimize the significance of the problem.[14]

To be sure, the Trump administration has also advanced a range of policies intended to ease pressure on household budgets. These include proposals to revise food tariffs, executive actions aimed at addressing rising beef prices, support for a temporary suspension of federal gasoline taxes, and tax relief

[14] https://www.npr.org/2025/12/11/nx-s1-5639957/trump-affordability-hoax-economy-midterms

measures under the "One Big Beautiful Bill" (OBBB), such as tax deductions for tip income. However, these initiatives, including those not yet implemented, have generally not been viewed as sufficiently effective in addressing the affordability challenge. Instead, the administration has faced criticism that tariff increases and inflationary pressures associated with the Iran war have worsened affordability conditions. As a result, affordability has proven to be a difficult issue for the administration to claim credit on. From this perspective, the issue arguably carries greater political value for Democrats as the opposition party.

So how are Democrats addressing the affordability issue? In February, the centrist New Democrat Coalition (NDC) unveiled its "Affordability Agenda."[15] Around the same time, the center-left think tank Chamber of Progress released a "Cost of Living Policy Blueprint."[16] In April, the progressive Congressional Progressive Caucus published its own platform, titled the "New Affordability Agenda."[17] Beyond the Democratic Party itself, the bipartisan centrist Problem Solvers Caucus also published a comprehensive affordability agenda in February, demonstrating efforts to advance policy discussions that include some Republican lawmakers as well.[18]

Meanwhile, the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), a growing force on the party's left flank, released a policy platform titled "Workers Deserve More!" in July.[19] The document includes a wide range of affordability-related proposals covering healthcare, housing, and other sectors. Among its recommendations are the treatment of food supply as a public utility, public ownership of electricity and other key industries, nationwide rent control, tuition-free public education through college, and the cancellation of all student debt.

Many of these proposals are fundamentally transformative in nature. They go beyond conventional affordability measures by challenging existing patterns of ownership and advocating policies such as highly progressive wealth taxation and public ownership of major industries. As such, they differ not only from the supply-side affordability agenda promoted by Democratic centrists, but also from the positions of more traditional progressive groups such as the Progressive Caucus, which generally focus on stronger regulation of corporations rather than restructuring the foundations of the economic system itself.

Thus, while Democrats broadly share a sense of urgency regarding the affordability crisis, there remains a significant divide between the party's mainstream centrist wing and the increasingly influential DSA-led left over how the problem should be addressed. As recent primary elections have demonstrated, the DSA has become a significant force within Democratic politics and is capable of fielding competitive candidates in many races. As a result, party moderates cannot simply ignore its policy preferences.

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[15] https://newdemocratcoalition.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/new-dems-unveil-affordability-agenda-the-coalitions-answer-to-the-cost-of-living-crisis

[16] https://progresschamber.org/research/2026-cost-of-living-policy-blueprint/

[17] https://progressives.house.gov/2026/4/progressive-caucus-announces-new-affordability-agenda

[18] https://problemsolverscaucus.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=882

[19] https://program.dsausa.org/

The consequence is that, even on affordability, an issue that should theoretically provide a major political advantage for the opposition, Democrats have thus far been unable to articulate a unified party-wide agenda.

Figure 11: Comparison of Major Democratic Affordability Policy Agendas

	Centrists (NDC / CoP, etc.)	Radical Left (DSA)
Food	Normalize trade through tariff reductions; strengthen market competition and crack down on corporate price gouging.	Promote the principle that food should be treated as a public good or public utility rather than a profit-driven business.
Energy	Expand energy supply through permitting reform and faster infrastructure construction; pursue an "all-of-the-above" energy strategy.	Gradually phase out fossil fuels; place electricity and key energy industries under public ownership while implementing a Green New Deal.
Housing	Relax zoning and permitting rules to facilitate construction of 4 million new homes over the next decade by both public and private sectors.	Create publicly owned social housing, impose strict regulation on investment properties, enact nationwide rent control, and guarantee tenants access to legal counsel.
Healthcare	Build on the Affordable Care Act (ACA) through expanded premium subsidies and prescription drug price caps.	Guarantee universal healthcare with zero out-of-pocket costs, moving toward a single-payer system.
Other (Education, etc.)	Expand childcare and eldercare subsidies, gradually raise the minimum wage, and establish paid family leave.	Provide free public education from pre-K through college, cancel all student debt, establish a 32-hour workweek with full pay and benefits, and guarantee a living wage.
Funding Approach	Emphasize reducing costs through deregulation and expanded supply.	Finance programs through aggressive taxation of the wealthiest individuals and large corporations, as well as revenue from publicly owned industries.

Sources: NDC、CoP、Progressive Caucus、Problem Solvers Caucus、DSA

However, it would be premature to conclude that these internal policy differences will necessarily undermine Democratic candidates in the midterm elections. Unlike a presidential election, the midterms are ultimately a collection of state-level and local contests, effectively a series of individual races. In such elections, voters often focus more heavily on the appeal of individual candidates and their specific policy proposals than on a unified national party platform.

Indeed, some policies associated with the DSA, such as the municipally owned grocery stores proposed by New York City mayoral candidate Zohran Mamdani, are already being pursued at the local government level. In this sense, Democrats' inability to present a single unified affordability agenda may not be decisive in determining the outcome of the midterms.

The greater danger may lie beyond the midterms. What is merely an inconvenience in 2026 could become a significant liability in the 2028 presidential election. Unlike the midterms, where a degree of ideological diversity can coexist among individual candidates, a presidential election requires a nationwide "team effort" behind a single party nominee.

Moreover, the affordability crisis is unlikely to disappear within the next two years. The factors driving concerns over housing, healthcare, energy costs, and living standards are structural rather than temporary, making it likely that affordability will remain a central political issue in 2028. To some extent, the nature of the midterms allows Democrats to postpone resolving their internal disagreements. Yet doing so may simply defer, rather than eliminate, the challenge. In that sense, continuing to ride short-term electoral momentum without addressing underlying policy divisions could leave Democrats carrying a significant long-term political risk, even if it helps them achieve gains in the near term.

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