



CONSUMER CHOICE

Policymakers at all levels make laws and regulations that can restrict households' purchasing decisions, influencing which products Americans can and can't buy or—in some cases—which products they *must* buy. While governments (especially state governments) *do* have some role in restricting the use, purchase, or sale of things that are harmful and/or dehumanizing, such as drugs, hazardous substances, abortions, gambling, pornography, and prostitution, policymakers should avoid onerous restrictions on adults' choices of products where no direct harm is at stake. People should be free to decide, for example, whether they want to drive a gasoline-powered vehicle or an electric vehicle. They should be allowed to choose to buy home appliances that do or don't meet strict efficiency standards. Individuals and families—not the government—should decide which insurance, education, and childcare services are right for them.

The government uses several mechanisms to affect which products people purchase, including mandates, regulations, licensing, taxes, subsidization, and government provision of services. The distinction between these actions isn't always clear. For example, Obamacare originally included an individual *mandate* that required all Americans to obtain health insurance or pay a monetary penalty; Chief Justice John Roberts instead interpreted it as a tax on individuals who don't carry health insurance. Regardless of what it's called, though, when policymakers allow their preferences to interfere with consumer choice, people end up spending more for less. Government constraints on consumer choice lead to one of three things:

- 1) People paying more for the goods and services they want;
- 2) People being unable to buy products at *any* price; or
- 3) People being compelled to buy products or product features that they don't want.

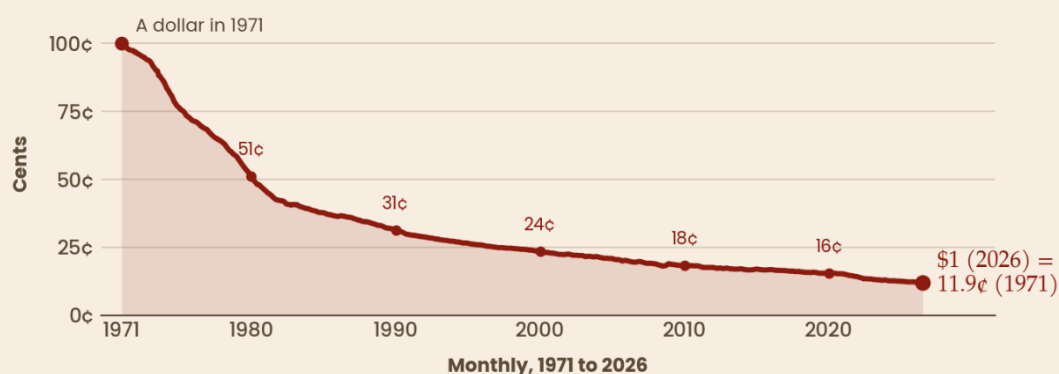
Families' ability to control how they spend their money is a critical aspect of affordability, and ill-advised interventions in consumer choice are among the most direct and evident ways that governments contribute to unaffordability.

Policymakers' actions should respect American individuals and families enough to recognize that they know best how to spend their own money.



The dollar has lost 88% of its purchasing power since 1971

What a dollar from 1971 through 2026 would have been worth in 1971



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Purchasing Power of the Consumer Dollar in U.S. City Average (CUUR0000SA0R) — via FRED, rebased so that January 1971 = 100 cents. The series is the reciprocal of the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers.

The average paycheck buys fewer groceries than it did six years ago

Median weekly earnings of full-time workers, adjusted for changes in grocery prices



Sources: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Median Usual Weekly Earnings of Full-Time Wage and Salary Workers, and the CPI for Food at Home — via FRED. Earnings are deflated by the food-at-home index and adjusted relative to Q2 2026 grocery prices.