Lowering Food Prices: Do Consumers Think Politicians Are Able to Reduce Costs?

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Introduction

As campaign season heats up, food price issues return to the center of the political debate. In recent days, both presidential candidates have highlighted the persistent concerns about the cost of food and touted their proposals' abilities to lower prices. As with any promise on the campaign trail, proposals to lower food prices have been met with elation, skepticism, and criticism by a variety of stakeholders, including economists and food manufacturers (e.g., *Bloomberg*, 2024; Colvin, 2024; Hanrahan, 2024; Tankersley and Smialek, 2024; Yarrow, 2024). It appears unclear whether consumers and voters think that those in political power can help lower food prices if elected. In this post we review the latest results from the Gardner Food and Agricultural Policy Survey (GFAPS) to address this question.

Methods

In this post we utilize results from the tenth wave of the GFAPS, conducted in August 2024. Each wave recruits approximately 1,000 U.S. consumers to match the U.S. population in terms of gender, age, household income, and geographic region. Consumers are surveyed online about their perceptions of food and agricultural issues and policies. For example, we have previously investigated perceptions of prices, acceptable reasons for price increases, and experiences with inflation more generally (see *farmdoc daily*, March 7, 2024; June 17, 2024; and June 10, 2024).

In the survey, we gauge public perceptions of political parties' power to lower food prices. Specifically, we asked participants, "Which political party, if any, do you think can help to lower food prices in grocery stores?" Participants could select one of four options: (1) Republicans, (2) Democrats, (3) It will require

support from both Republicans and Democrats, or (4) I don't think any party can lower food prices in grocery stores. The order of the two political parties was randomized between position 1 and 2 to prevent ordering effects.

To evaluate how perceptions differed across participants' political views we analyze results across participants' stated political parties (Republican, Democrat, or a combined category for Independent/Other). We also analyze results across participants' preferred presidential candidate. Here, we asked participants which presidential candidate they most support: Donald Trump, Kamala Harris, or a third party candidate. The order of Trump and Harris was randomized to prevent ordering effects.

Results

Prominence on the campaign trail is a clear indicator of the political salience of an issue, and surveys have continually shown that the inflation and affordability of prices rank as a top issue for voters this year (e.g., Saad, 2024; *YouGov*, 2024). This emphasis on food prices provides an example relevant to agriculture and the food system.

Less clear, however, is the public's perceptions about the ability of any elected official to meaningfully affect outcomes. More simply, does the public believe that political parties can help lower prices?
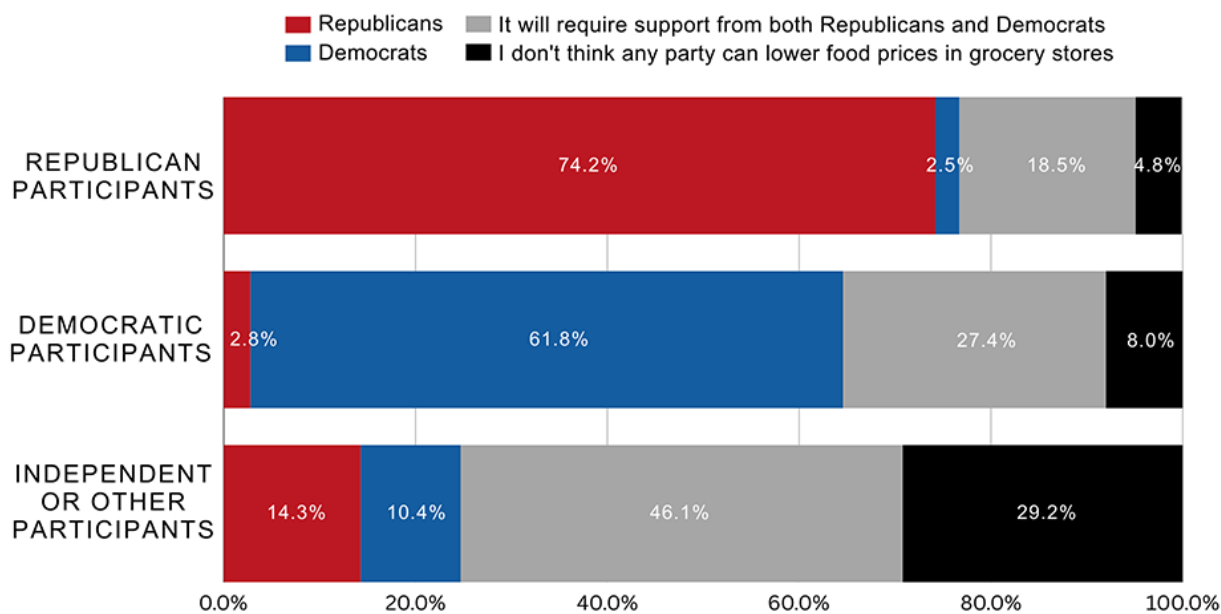
In the most recent wave of the GFAPS, participants were asked about both their political views and their perceptions surrounding food prices. Here, we analyze public perceptions of political parties' power to help lower food prices at grocery stores and provide political context by evaluating how these perceptions differ across participants' own politics.

Figure 1 presents these results for Republican participants (n=353), Democratic participants (n=351), and Independent/Other participants (n=308). Overall, we find that most respondents thought political parties could help lower food prices. Less than 5% of those identifying as Republicans and 8% of Democrats responded that they did not think any party could help lower prices. More respondents identifying as Independent or as something other than Republicans or Democrats had their doubts about any candidate's ability to impact food prices (29.2%); however, this was still a minority.

In terms of who respondents thought would be best suited to help lower food prices, we find that most Republicans (74.2%) thought only Republicans could lower food prices; similarly, a majority of Democrats (61.8%) thought only Democrats could lower food prices.

Individuals who identified as Independent/Other were most likely to respond that joint efforts by both Republican and Democrats would be required to lower food prices (46.1%). Fewer participants who identified with one of the two main parties (27.4% of Democratic participants and 18.4% of Republican participants) thought joint efforts would be required.

FIGURE 1.
WHO DO U.S. CONSUMERS THINK CAN HELP LOWER FOOD PRICES IN GROCERY STORES?

Legend:
- Republicans (red)
- Democrats (blue)
- It will require support from both Republicans and Democrats (gray)
- I don't think any party can lower food prices in grocery stores (black)

REPUBLICAN PARTICIPANTS: 74.2% | 2.5% | 18.5% | 4.8%
DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPANTS: 2.8% | 61.8% | 27.4% | 8.0%
INDEPENDENT OR OTHER PARTICIPANTS: 14.3% | 10.4% | 46.1% | 29.2%

Results from the Gardner Food and Agricultural Policy Survey (August 2024)

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We connect these results to the presidential campaign more directly by analyzing these perceptions across participants' preferred presidential candidate. Table 1 presents these results.

We find that, for participants who indicated they preferred Trump (n=458), 64.6% thought only Republicans could lower food prices. Similarly, for participants who preferred Harris (n=446), 50.4% thought only Democrats could lower food prices. A larger proportion of Harris supporters thought reducing food prices would require both Republicans and Democrats (35.9%) than those who most preferred Trump (21.9%). Similarly, a larger proportion of Harris supporters thought neither party could help reduce food prices (11.2%) relative to those who supported Trump (8.3%). Finally, most individuals who responded that they preferred a third party candidate (n=109) thought that neither party could lower prices (43.1%) or that it would require the efforts of both parties (39.4%).

Table 1. Proportion of Participants Who Indicated Each Group Could Help to Lower Food Prices in Grocery Stores, Across Participants' Preferred Presidential Candidate

	Participants' Preferred Presidential Candidate		
	Donald Trump	Kamala Harris	A third party candidate
Republicans	64.6%	2.5%	9.2%
Democrats	5.3%	50.4%	8.3%
It will require support from both Republicans and Democrats	21.9%	35.9%	39.4%
I don't think any party can lower food prices in grocery stores	8.3%	11.2%	43.1%

Conclusions

Concerns about the cost of food remain a priority for consumers and voters, and the recent emphasis on food prices by both presidential candidates demonstrates the issue's continued political salience. Using the Gardner Food and Agriculture Policy Survey, we evaluate U.S. consumers' perceptions of the power of politicians to make change at the grocery store.

We find that most respondents thought that political parties could help lower food prices and grocery bills. Perhaps not surprisingly in a polarized political environment, most respondents who identified with one of the major parties thought that only their party could lower prices. Those who identified as independent or aligned with a third party were somewhat less confident that politicians could help lower food prices. Additionally, our results indicate that Independent/Other participants were more likely to believe bipartisan efforts would be required to lower food prices (46.1%) compared to those who identified with one of the two major parties (27.4% of Democratic participants and 18.4% of Republican participants).

To more closely connect the results to the ongoing presidential campaigns, we analyze results across participants' preferred presidential candidate. Here, we find that more Trump supporters thought that his party could lower prices on its own, while a slim majority of Harris supporters thought that her party could. Whereas nearly 40% of those who most preferred a third party candidate thought bipartisan efforts would be required to lower food costs. Additionally, a larger proportion of Harris supporters (35.9%) thought bipartisanship would be needed than Trump supporters (21.9%).

These results underscore that – in line with continued promises from the campaign trail – U.S. consumers believe politicians can help reduce food costs. However, our results highlight that *who* the public believes can do so is highly partisan. How this issue unfolds further in the campaign or translates into electoral success remains to be seen, but in continuing to seek perspectives from consumers about food and agricultural issues, the Gardner Food and Agriculture Policy Survey provides much food for thought.

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