

A Content Analysis of Newspaper Coverage of Reauthorizing SNAP in the 2018 Farm Bill

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Introduction/need for research

The U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Agriculture, established by the United States Congress in 1820 (Committee History, n.d.), has jurisdiction over agriculture, forestry, nutrition, water conservation, and other agricultural related issues. The Committee on Agriculture reauthorizes farm assistance, conservation, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), and other agricultural related programs in an omnibus farm bill every five years. The renewals allow policy makers to comprehensively and periodically address agricultural and food issues (Johnson & Monke, 2013). SNAP is a federal program that provides nutrition benefits to supplement the food budget of low-income Americans (USDA-FNS, 2018). In November 2014, Texas Republican U.S. Representative K. Michael Conaway was selected to become the chairman of the committee. In February 2015, Conaway began a congressional hearing series on SNAP titled, "The Past, Present, and Future of SNAP." The hearing series consisted of 21 hearings with a total of 81 witnesses testifying on SNAP's successes, challenges, and improvements to be made. In December of 2016, Conaway released a report on the series detailing its findings. The hearing series and report laid the foundation for the Committee's SNAP reforms in the 2018 Farm Bill (House Agriculture Committee, 2016).

The purpose of this study was to research the newspaper coverage reporting on the bill to analyze how the media reported on the process in Conaway's home district. The media's role in reporting on congressional actions is vital for the public because the events are rarely witnessed firsthand (Denton & Woodward, 1998). To fulfill this purpose, this study was guided by one research objective: Describe the potential level of bias in newspaper articles published about SNAP in the 2018 Farm Bill in Rep. Conaway's home district, using the Hayakawa-Lowry coding instrument.

Theoretical Framework

Framing theory was used as a framework to guide this research. Framing refers to the patterns of interpretation which are prevalent in media coverage and in people's mind and emphasizing certain aspects of reality while ignoring others (Donsbach & Traugott, 2012). The theory focuses on the media's attention to certain events or topics and places them within a field of meaning (Davie, 2020).

Methodology

A content analysis was performed on newspaper articles in the four of the largest newspapers in Conaway's home district from the time the Committee's hearing series began on February 25, 2015, to December 20, 2018, when the 2018 Farm Bill was signed into law by the United States President. A content analysis was used to gain an understanding of newspaper media the District's constituents could have been exposed to during the farm bill negotiations. The researcher first scanned the articles to determine the overall frame or theme. Then the researcher conducted an analysis for bias using the Hayakawa-Lowry media bias coding system. This system analyzes three types of sentences in which a person communicates with another person: reports, inferences, and judgements.

Results

The research sample yielded 53 articles during 2015 to 2018. A majority were published in 2018 ($n = 43$; 81.1%). Only 11.3% were published in 2017 ($n = 6$), and 7.6% were published in 2016 ($n = 4$). There were no farm bill or SNAP articles published in 2015. A majority of the articles were published in the *Midland-Telegram Reporter* ($n = 31$), followed by the *San Angelo*

Standard-Times ($n = 12$), the *Odessa American* ($n = 7$), and lastly the *Brownwood Bulletin* ($n = 3$). In the article sample, 16 articles (30.1%) were written by journalists for one of the newspapers within Conaway's home district. The remaining 37 (69.8%) articles were originally published in newspapers outside Conaway's home by a subscription-based news service, such as the Associated Press. The most frequent frame of the articles ($n = 17$) was explanation of the issue. The second highest primary frame was farm program focus ($n = 16$). Next was work requirements (10), then cutting funding for SNAP (8), and lastly, welfare reform/reinvestment in SNAP ($n = 2$). The most frequent tone of the sample was negative with (43.3%, 23). There were 15 articles with a positive tone (28.3%) and 15 articles with a neutral tone (28.3%).

The 53 articles contained a total of 1,455 sentences. Of these, 530 sentences were report attributed sentences (17.8%) and report unattributed sentences (18.6%). In the sample, 114 sentences were categorized as labeled inferences (2.4%) and unlabeled inferences (5.3%). The sample contained 480 sentences categorized as attributed judgements favorable (16.2%) or unfavorable (16.7%) toward the subject. There were 195 sentences categorized as unattributed judgements favorable (3.3%) or unfavorable (9.9%) toward the subject. The articles contained 139 sentences classified as other (9.5%), which were rhetorical questions, introductory sentences, incomplete sentences, or sentences pertaining to non-SNAP policy issues, like farm programs.

In 2018, the year the 2014 Farm Bill was going to expire, there was a substantial number of articles ($n = 43$) published pertaining to SNAP and the farm bill, but very few in the years preceding. The media placed an importance on SNAP and the farm bill significantly more when it was up for expiration because programs using discretionary funding expire or farm commodity programs will revert to permanent laws in previous farm bills. There were 21 hearings in the series, in which half had an emphasis in workforce development, but the other half covered various components and aspects of SNAP and other programs reauthorized within the Nutrition Title of the farm bill; however, very few of those aspects were covered in the news media. In the article sample, 48 of the 53 articles discussed the work section of the bill. It is possible journalists focused on main point so their audience could easily identify these frames rather than the various other aspects of SNAP and the Nutrition Title. Gitlin (1980) said news frames serve as routines for journalists to quickly identify and classify information for their audience.

Implications/recommendations/impact on profession

This study was a baseline research for future studies on the legislative process and media coverage in reauthorizing SNAP in the farm bill. By understanding how the media portrays amendments to SNAP in the farm bill, agricultural communicators will be able to more effectively develop messages to promote reforms to the farm bill that improve nutrition and agricultural initiatives to best serve producers and consumers. This study will provide background for other studies analyzing the legislative process and the media's coverage of the process. Understanding how political factors outside of the Committee shape legislation, such as executive initiatives or how elections impact the legislative process in Congress may lead to improved messaging for Congressional initiatives.

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