

**Framing Agricultural Labor Issues: An Analysis of Florida and California H-2A Program
News Coverage**

Finn Garrison

Oregon State University
Department of Agricultural Education and Agricultural Sciences
130 Strand Agriculture Hall
Corvallis, OR 97331
541-737-5469
frances.garrison@oregonstate.edu

Dr. Cara Lawson

Oregon State University
Department of Agricultural Education and Agricultural Sciences
130 Strand Agriculture Hall
Corvallis, OR 97331
541-737-5469
cara.lawson@oregonstate.edu

Lauren LaGrande

Oregon State University
Department of Agricultural Education and Agricultural Sciences
130 Strand Agriculture Hall
Corvallis, OR 97331
541-737-5469
lauren.lagrande@oregonstate.edu

Introduction

In 1986, the Immigration Control and Reform Act created the H-2A program to allow temporary agricultural workers to legally enter the U.S. and to offset the potential decline in undocumented immigrants (Guan et al., 2018). For many in agriculture who seek to address needs associated with labor shortages, the use of temporary agricultural workers is helpful, especially for seasonal jobs (Luckstead & Devadoss, 2019). H-2A labor has increased fivefold since 2005 (Bier, 2020). However, the H-2A program is not without complexities in terms of program requirements for employers (Vaughan et al., 2019), cost considerations, and policies (Escalante et al., 2019).

When issues are controversial or complex, the news media play a role in shaping public perceptions about the issue and can also influence policy (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). As stakeholders work to resolve the issues associated with the H-2A program, it is important to understand how the news media communicate the issue. The purpose of this study was to explore media frames utilized to communicate about the H-2A program.

Theoretical Framework

Framing suggests placing emphasis on certain elements of an issue over others can affect how the issue is viewed or perceived by the public (Chong & Druckman, 2007). To simplify and make complicated issues easier to understand, the media employ frames to share details with their audiences (Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Frames help media consumers make sense of relevant events, organize key ideas, and suggest issues at hand. Finally, frames can be used to define problems, diagnose causes, and suggest remedies while at the same time omitting or obscuring other associated elements of the topic (Entman, 1993), which could result in incomplete presentations of information.

While scholars have noted a recent prevalence in media coverage of the impact of COVID-19 on farmworker communities (Flocks, 2020), a general lack of studies concerning farm labor or H-2A coverage in the media exists. Framing provides the media with options to communicate about issues not easily understood. Issues in agriculture, especially those with policy implications, can take on a variety of frames that may result in changes in actions or policies.

Methodology

Quantitative content analysis was applied to determine how the H-2A program was framed in the *Orlando Sentinel* and *The Fresno Bee*. These newspapers are located in the top two states accounting for more than half of all certified H-2A jobs in the U.S. in 2020 – Florida and California. More specifically, these publications were selected in order to compare two different regions in the U.S, because of their close proximity to major agricultural production sites in the states, and top circulation rates (Agility PR Solutions, 2021). Newspapers were selected for analysis because news coverage can affect perceptions of knowledge about an issue (Moy et al., 2004).

A final sample of 41 articles were included in the analysis. Articles for both newspapers were collected via the NewsBank Database by searching the term “H-2A” with a time period from January 1, 2008 to December 31, 2020. This timeframe was selected because in 2008 the Department of Homeland Security (2008) published a new list of countries eligible to participate

in the H-2A program. Articles that were not primarily focused on the H-2A program were omitted from the study. A researcher-developed codebook was the primary instrument, which was created after a thorough literature review of similar news sources. Reliability on the instrument was established *a priori*. Articles were coded for date, newspaper and frame.

Results/Findings

The most common frame in the dataset was “policy and government” ($n = 21$). This frame related to government or elected official involvement on the issue. Example articles that employed this frame covered topics such as immigration reform and proposed policy changes. The second most common frame was “labor,” ($n = 8$). Articles implementing “labor” frame discussed the need or lack of need for migrant labor. Of note, articles in this frame tended to focus on a lack of local farm labor and the need for H-2A labor. The “advocacy and awareness” frame ($n = 5$), involved non-government groups and activists who shared information on issues with housing, working conditions, and wages for H-2A workers. Other frames that appeared in the dataset were “legal and crime” ($n = 4$), “economic” ($n = 2$) and “health” ($n = 1$). The Fresno Bee had almost twice as many articles ($n = 27$) as the Orlando Sentinel ($n = 14$). Both papers had the same top frame, “policy and government.” However, the “advocacy and awareness” frame was presented in a larger percentage of articles in the Orlando Sentinel ($n = 14$, 21%) than The Fresno Bee ($n = 2$, 7%).

Conclusions/Recommendations

The H-2A program is first and foremost the result of governmental policy (Guan et al., 2018). As government and elected officials are responsible for creating and altering policies, and because concerns with policy have been cited in the past (Escalante et al., 2019), the common use of the “government and policy” frame within this study was not unusual. At the same time, the fact that both newspapers in this study most commonly utilized this frame suggests the issues associated with the H2-A program may be more national than regional. While there may be nuance in this frame between newspapers, the prominence of this frame seemingly instills the issue as one of policy and government from a media standpoint. The media hold the potential to influence policy (Pan & Kosicki, 1993), so it is reasonable to assume that framing articles in this way may have implications for future policy decisions on this issue.

The H-2A program was created to help address farm labor needs, which helps to explain why “labor” was also a common frame in the dataset. As agriculturalists continue to seek a resolution to farm labor needs, the H-2A program will likely play an important role (Luckstead & Devadoss, 2019). Issues within the program have been identified (Vaughan et al., 2019) and will need to be resolved to improve experiences for both workers and farmers, and thus provide a more reliable food system. As issues unfold and resolutions are sought, the media play a role in defining problems and suggesting remedies (Entman, 1993) and influence knowledge about an issue (Moy et al., 2004). Given the role of H2-A programs throughout the U.S., future studies should explore the use of frames in other newspapers. Future studies should also investigate sources relied upon by the media when communicating about the H2-A program. Based on the lack of H-2A workers themselves as sources, the news media should attempt to focus more on their voices and perspectives related to the issue in their reporting.

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