

What's in a Name? A Case Study of "Section 8" in Illinois FFA

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Introduction

In Illinois FFA, the FFA is divided into five Districts and within those Districts, a number of Sections. The state officer team includes a President elected from each Section. Each is referred to as Section (number) president. The FFA chapters representing the state's largest metropolitan city are located within Section 8. The constitution of the state agricultural education teachers' association requires their Board of Directors to periodically make needed revisions to the boundary lines of Sections and Districts. The voted change must also be approved by the state FFA membership at a meeting held during the state convention.

The United States Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) administers a housing choice voucher program to assist with funding for housing targeting families that meet income guidelines, the elderly, and those with a disability (U.S. HUD, n.d.). The vouchers are administered by local public housing authorities. The program is commonly referred to as "Section 8". In fact, the HUD website subtitles the housing choice voucher program as Section 8.

In 2022, an amendment to the agriculture teachers' association Constitution was proposed to change the FFA division name from "section" to "region." The proposal reasoning said that Section 8 was known outside of Illinois agricultural education as related to HUD housing and that this created confusion for external stakeholders when individuals identified themselves as "part of Section 8" (Illinois FFA Board, 2022). In 2022, student delegates voted down the amendment at the state FFA convention. At the following teachers' association meeting, the teachers approved the amendment only if the student membership voted to approve the amendment the following year. In 2023, the amendment was voted down by the student membership at the state convention.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Symbolic interactionism (Carter & Fuller, 2015) addresses how society is made and regulated through repetitive interactions. According to the theory, people use language and symbols to communicate ideas and concepts. According to Blumer (1969), there are four main principles of social interaction: 1) individuals act relative to the meaning objects have to them, 2) social and cultural interactions are defined by individuals' own meaning, 3) meanings originate from *outside* of these interactions, and 4) meanings are recreated through interpretations of interactions. West and Zimmerman (1987) used this theory to explain how masculinity and femininity are developed from interactions and socialization, arguing that gender was not an internal state of being, but rather resulted from these interactions. Other examples of symbolic interactionism in the literature include examining how societal influencers impact farmers' exposure to safety hazards (Sorenson et al., 2017), explaining how architecture holds and conveys society's shared symbols (Lawrence & Low, 1990), and how meanings shape thoughts and actions through self-reflection (Smith & Bugni, 2006).

Approximately one month after amendment failed at the 2023 state FFA convention, we sent a Qualtrics XM © online survey to all ag-ed teachers in the Illinois listserv ($N = 655$). This survey asked two open-ended questions, the first asking for the teacher's opinion on the amendment debate, and the second asking them to relay what they understand of their students' opinions. In order to maintain anonymity, "FFA District taught in" was the only demographic collected. Data collection resulted in a 23.5% response rate ($n = 154$). Data was coded in two rounds by three researchers. In the first round, responses were coded as "for," "against," or "neutral" in relation to the amendment. The second round of coding consisted of open coding responses within each of the first-round categories.

Findings

Findings indicated a majority of teacher respondents were “against” the amendment, however most “for” responses came from teachers in Districts 1 and 2. For reference, Section 8 is housed in District 2. However, when teachers were asked their perceptions of *students’* opinions on the issue, they were more likely to perceive their students as “against” the change with only nine teachers stating their students were “for” it. The geographic breakdown of both questions is similar in distribution, with more positive responses in Districts 1 and 2 and more negative in Districts 4 and 5, the two districts furthest geographically from Section 8.

Within the “for” responses, two themes arose: 1) *Inclusivity*, and 2) *Chicago vs. Illinois*. *Inclusivity* was highlighted with participants reflecting on how the name change could lead to a more inclusive FFA. One participant described that “everyone deserves a fair shake, and if this change to the name can give it, then so be it.” Many responses were in reference to *others*. However, some teachers responded with their own students in mind. One teacher stated, “I’m in favor [of the change because] my kids have been racially profiled being assigned ‘Section 8.’”

Zooming out from the organization, some participants described the failing of the amendment as a larger cultural issue between the state as a whole and its largest city, located in Section 8. One teacher described this by saying “if I were to generalize...the rest of the state would prefer to see Chicago suffer than succeed.” This sentiment was shared by another teacher who felt that “students have been led to believe that it is Chicago against the rest of the state.”

Three themes arose from the responses that were coded as *against* the proposed changes: 1) concerns and defense of *Parliamentary Procedure*, 2) change for the *Wrong Reason(s)*, and 3) annoyance with a *Loud Minority*. As it pertains to *Parliamentary Procedure*, participants indicated frustration with the “repeated” nature of this measure. This is seen through two teachers sharing that it was “disrespectful to our students who already voted it down,” and “This has been VOTED on!!! MOVE ON!!!” Another teacher felt “even teachers” will “push back...if the board pushes this a 3rd time...this topic should not come up again.” A final participant stated absolutely that “as per parliamentary law, [being voted down] should be the end of that debate.”

Some teachers felt *Reasons* for the change were negligent or altogether *wrong*. One asked “why change [our traditions] when it doesn’t really affect anything?” Another stated changing the term would “end up being more work” for whoever is “rewording everything.” Finally, many expressed frustrations with the *Loud Minority* who continued to champion the change. The comments were largely laced with frustration, as one participant who believed that “people are offended by something because they choose to be offended. This has been absolute drama and a waste of time.” Another reflected “giving in” would lead to unintended consequences: “imagine the yarn that will start to unravel.”

Finally, some participants felt the proposed change was politically motivated. One criticized the expansion of agricultural education into urban schools: “Somehow the idea of pushing for FFA in the city schools and major suburbs has taken root where it really has no place...Liberal America wants to change everything to please the minority.”

Conclusions and Implications

Symbolic interactionism provides a lens to view teacher responses to the “section” word change. The themes in favor reflected reactions on the individual level, such as individual students feelings, or alluded to a larger cultural issue of urban and rural spaces. In contrast, the responses against reflected a desire to stick with tradition and frustration against repeated votes. Findings begin to describe the ideological differences between agricultural education teachers as it relates to long standing social symbols. The debate in Illinois may serve as a case study for other proposed policy changes and equity issues within agricultural education institutions.

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