Growing Grassroots: Examining Policy Perceptions and Engagement Among Members of Florida Agricultural Organizations

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Abstract

Agriculture organization (AO) members are key stakeholders within the agriculture and natural resources (ANR) sector, and their engagement in policy decisions can help direct future policy formulation and implementation. Such policies and regulations are often determined by and voted upon by elected officials, and, therefore, the decisions made by those officials have become key influencers of the functionality and future direction of agricultural operations. This study was conducted to examine the impact of AO members' perceptions, abilities, and prior efforts on their likeliness of contacting an elected official and engaging in ANR policy. AO members in this study who had greater confidence in their abilities to engage in ANR policy and had previously contacted an elected official were more likely to contact an elected official about a future policy. AO members who had more favorable beliefs about how elected officials prepare to vote, however, were less likely to engage in ANR policy by contacting an elected official. Future practice should include training and educational opportunities to enhance AO members' perceptions of their ability to engage with their elected officials and influence ANR policy decisions. Future research should be conducted to gain a better understanding of the challenges faced by AO members when contacting elected officials and engaging in ANR policy.

Introduction

The United States' (U.S.) agriculture sector produces a substantial portion of national and worldwide food supplies and resources, which has been made possible through new, innovative practices, technologies, and policies (Enns et al., 2016). Agriculture and natural resources (ANR) policy has significantly shaped this sector via legislation pertaining to topics such as the implementation and use of new technologies and practices, production, trade, and conservation measures (Florida Farm Bureau, n.d; Rausser & Zilberman, 2014). Further, ANR policies and regulations can be significant in determining the income and livelihood of farmers and ranchers

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(Kaufman et al., 2008). As such policies and regulations are often determined by and voted upon by elected officials, the decisions made by those officials have become key influencers of the functionality and future direction of agricultural operations (Effland, 2000). This is particularly true in Florida, where two-thirds of the land is managed by the ANR sector. Moreover, the agricultural sector in Florida contributes significantly to the local economy. Specifically, Florida agriculture accounts for more than 47,000 farms spanning roughly 9.5 million acres, 2.2 million full- and part-time job positions, and commodities accounting for approximately $4 billion in U.S. exports (Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, 2017; University of Florida, 2016).

Elected officials are responsible for addressing public issues as it relates to creating laws and policies (Telg & Rampold, 2018). Subsequent policy decisions thus rely on collaboration among all stakeholder groups to increase the likelihood of constituent representation and ensure decisions made are not based solely on local, state, or national officials' perspectives (Chirenje et al., 2013; Eden, 1996; Geurtz & van de Wijdeven, 2010; Michels & De Graaf, 2017; O'Fairchaellaigh, 2010; Yang & Pandey, 2011). As members of the public are those most impacted by new policy decisions (O'Faircheallaigh, 2010), their participation in contacting local, state, or national elected officials is necessary for directing how their interests are represented by their elected officials and holding those officials accountable to the needs of those they serve (Brookman, 2014; Chirenje et al., 2013). Further, public participation helps legitimize proposed policy decisions or actions (Lynch et al., 2016; Michels & de Graaf, 2017) and is often critical to the adoption of a proposed initiative (Chirenje et al., 2013; Geurtz & van de Wijdeven, 2010; Yang & Pandey, 2011).

Constituents can engage in the policy decision process by contacting their elected officials and providing relevant information based on their direct experiences or insights (Butler & Nickerson, 2011; Lynch et al., 2016; Michels & De Graaf, 2017; O'Faircheallaigh, 2010). Agriculture organization (AO) members are key stakeholders within the ANR sector, and their engagement and participation in policy decisions can have a significant impact on policy formulation and implementation (Reimer, 2013). For example, in a prior study conducted by Lawson et al. (2020) county commissioners identified communication from a farmer or rancher as the factor that would most influence their decision-making when voting on an ANR policy. While policy engagement among agricultural advocacy groups is not a new concept, the frequency of engagement among agricultural groups has remained slightly less than other key policy areas, such as environmental and healthcare policy (Grossman, 2012). With increased ease of making public statements or expressing views on a policy through social media or other internet platforms, policy engagement among AO members can be particularly influential in shaping policy decisions (Reimer, 2013). However, AO members must first be willing and equipped to engage in ANR policy.

A review of the literature revealed a general lack of prior research pertaining to AO members' perceptions of how elected officials make decisions about ANR policies, members' engagement in policy, and factors that influence their engagement. Prior studies have focused on factors such as strategic positioning or candidate valence as playing a vital role in elected officials' decision-making (Adams et al., 2011; Caldarone et al., 2009; Wegener et al., 2012). For example, Adams et al. (2011) referred to competence, integrity, and dedication to public service as character valence, which voters' value, while campaign skills and a person's familiar name referred to strategic valence. The researchers found when candidates encountered a challenger with positive character valence, it resulted in candidates adjusting their behavior to closer reflect voter expectations resulting "superior policy representation" (Adams et al., 2011). Similarly, Caldarone et al. (2009) examined policy decisions of elected officials in partisan elections. They found justices were more likely to favor the majority position on issues when in nonpartisan systems. Further, their findings suggested the same may be true outside of the judicial context (Caldarone et al.,

2009). In other words, elected officials may tend to vote in a manner which favors their supporters or allies, so they are able to maintain their positions.

Information source and credibility were also identified as crucial factors in determining how elected officials prepared to vote on a policy, and collaborations with informed stakeholders were found to provide elected officials direction and confirmation regarding their position on a policy decision (Bastian & Coveney, 2012; Butler & Nickerson, 2011; Cash, 2016; Dodson et al., 2015; Feldman & Ingram, 2009; Jennings & Hall, 2012; Schmidt et al., 2014; Schnakenberg, 2017; Wegener et al., 2012). Additionally, policy makers review multiple sources of information in various formats and consider certain information more valuable. Dodson et al. (2015) investigated the types of and most useful information legislators sought when making policy decisions on health issues. Their findings indicated legislators' preference for summary information, which includes a combination of statistics and real stories. Further, legislators highlighted the importance of having locally relevant, up-to-date, and easily accessed data Dodson et al. (2015). Likewise, Schmidt et al. (2014), explored the motivations and priorities of North Carolina policymakers as it related to tobacco funding and how to effectively communicate tobacco programs outcomes. Their findings revealed the need to maintain regular contact with officials providing updates on the program's success. Emphasis should be placed on the economic implications of the program, as well as framing the program benefits in a manner which matches policymakers' stated focus (Schmidt et al., 2014). These findings suggest the engagement of AO members with firsthand knowledge of the impacts of a proposed policy is an effective means of impacting ANR policy to best reflect the needs of the ANR sector. Research is needed to better understand AO members' reason for engaging or not engaging in ANR policy to facilitate grassroots efforts to impact policy in an effective and productive manner for those involved in the ANR sector.

Theoretical Framework

Weiner's (1972) attribution theory (AT) guided this study. Attribution theory is concerned with how an individual interprets the cause of an event and the impact of those causal beliefs on his or her behavior (Weiner, 1972; 2010). An attribution refers to a person's judgment of why a particular incident occurred. The assigned source of responsibility then manifests in their subsequent behavior. Future actions are thus determined by individuals' causal attributions for their success or failure (Weiner, 1972; 2010). In the current study, AO members' causal attributions for their successes or failures in ANR policy engagement were not examined to describe a past event, but to explain the likeliness of future engagement.

The primary attributions individuals can make for their successes or failures include (a) effort, (b) ability, (c) task difficulty, and (d) luck (Weiner, 1972; see Figure 1). These attributions can be classified along two causal dimensions: locus of causality and stability. The *locus of causality dimension* demonstrates whether the attribution stems from internal or external factors, i.e., outcomes perceived as contingent upon one's actions or abilities, and those outside one's personal control. The *stability dimension* pertains to whether the attribution is stable or unstable. Stable factors are those considered permanent and unchangeable, while unstable factors are those perceived as temporary and easily changed (Weiner, 1972; 2010; see Figure 1). This study sought to examine the influence of the attributions ability, task difficulty, and effort on AO members' future engagement in ANR policy.

Figure 1

Model of Attributions for Success and Failure
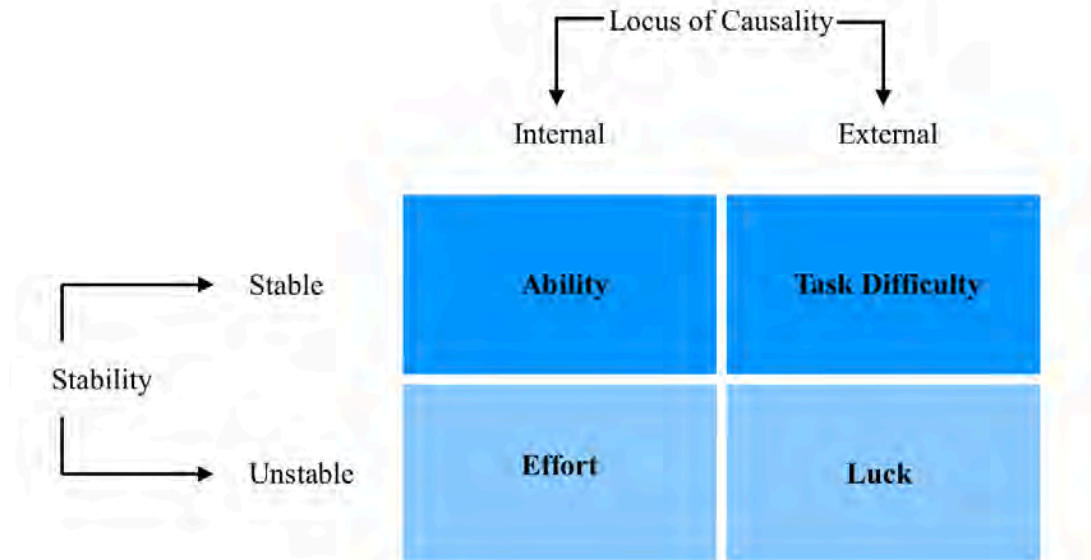
Note. Model adapted from "Attribution Theory, Achievement Motivation, and the Educational Process," by B. Weiner, 1972, *Review of Educational Research, 42*(2), p. 203–215 (https://www.jstor.org/stable/1170017).

Ability is an internal locus of causality factor perceived to be stable or unchanging (Weiner, 1972; 2010). For the purpose of the current study, ability was operationalized as AO members' perceptions of their ability to impact ANR policy decisions by contacting an elected official. Based on the attribution theory, AO members who have low confidence in their abilities to engage effectively in ANR policy decisions are likely to perceive such as something they cannot change and have greater expectations of failure in any attempts to do so in the future. These members would, therefore, be less likely to pursue future contact with elected officials about an ANR policy.

Task difficulty is a stable and unchanging factor with an external locus of control (Weiner, 1972; 2010). Task difficulty was operationalized in this study as AO members' favorable or unfavorable beliefs about the actions taken by elected officials when preparing to vote on ANR policies, as well as AO members' perceived impact their communication would have on an elected officials' policy decision. AO members who do not believe elected officials make efforts to be prepared and informed prior to voting on a policy may perceive the task of impacting their vote as difficult and likely to fail. AO members may also perceive little chance at success in impacting voting decision if they do not believe elected officials take into consideration the view of those in their demographic (e.g. farmers, ranchers, ANR professionals) when making decisions. In such case, AO members would be expected to foresee little success in contacting an elected official and be less likely to do so.

Effort is an internal locus of causality factor considered unstable and easily changed (Weiner, 1972; 2010). Effort was operationalized in the current study as AO members' prior contact with local, state, national elected officials about an ANR policy. In accordance with the attribution theory, AO members may attribute their successes or failures to impact ANR policy decisions to the degree of effort they put forth to do so. Further, AO members' who perceive prior efforts to contact an elected official as successful may be more likely to engage in such a manner in the future. Lastly, *luck* is a causal factor that is subject to change, but is outside an individual's personal

control (Weiner, 1972; 2010). Failure attributed to "bad luck" is thought to be relatively unlikely to produce negative expectations of future success due variations in what some consider as luck, as well as the extreme degree of change to which it is subjected (Weiner, 1972). Luck was not assessed as a variable in the current study.

Purpose and Objectives

Leaders of Florida agricultural commodity group organizations sought assistance from the researchers in helping to enhance their policy communication efforts to increase their members' policy engagement. As such, the current research was conducted as part of a larger project to help meet that need. The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of AO members' perceptions, abilities, and prior efforts on their likeliness of contacting an elected official and engaging in ANR policy. Five objectives guided this study:

1. Describe agriculture organization (AO) members' perceived ability to engage in ANR policy.
2. Describe AO members' perceived task difficulty of engaging in ANR policy in terms of their beliefs about how elected officials prepare to vote.
3. Describe AO members' perceived task difficulty of engaging in ANR policy in terms of the impact of communication from a farmer or rancher on elected officials' decision-making.
4. Describe AO members' prior efforts to contact a local, state, or national elected official about an ANR policy.
5. Determine if AO members' attributions (i.e., ability, task difficulty, effort) associated with successfully engaging in ANR policy predict their future likeliness of contacting an elected official about an ANR policy.

Methodology

Data Collection

The targeted population of this study was active email listserv members of five agricultural organizations in Florida: Florida Farm Bureau ($n = 839$); Florida Nursery, Growers and Landscape Association ($n = 3,934$); Florida Cattlemen's Association ($n = 5,920$); Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association ($n = 1,061$); and Wedgworth Leadership Institute ($n = 306$). Due to the possibility of multiple membership among respondents, population sizes for each organization are reported, rather than a total population size across all organizations. Data were collected using an online survey questionnaire. Leaders of each organization agreed to distribute an introductory email with information about the upcoming study, an initial email with the online link, and three follow-up emails each week for three weeks after the launch of the study.

Useable responses were collected from 439 members across all organizations. Multiple membership was high among this population, and a true response rate could not be reported due to the possibility of study participants being listserv members of more than one organization. In addition, the lack of access to AO members' contact information did not allow for the comparison of respondents to non-respondents. As such, nonresponse bias was assessed by comparing early to late respondents (Miller & Smith, 1983). This method has been used frequently in agricultural education and communication research (Lindner, Murphy, & Briers, 2001) and has been identified as appropriate for addressing nonresponse based on the assumption that late respondents are similar to non-respondents (Lindner et al., 2001; Miller & Smith, 1983). To better inform readers of the

risk of Type II error, the statistical test used, number of respondents in each group, statistical power, and results of each test are reported (Johnson & Shoulders, 2017).

Early respondents (those responding prior to the third reminder email; n = 316) were compared to late respondents (n = 123) on the predictor and dependent variables in this study, i.e., ability, task difficulty, effort, and motivation to engage in ANR policy, using two-tailed independent t-tests at the .05 alpha level; the power of all tests were 1.00 for a medium effect (*Cohen's d* = .0.50 [Cohen, 1988]). There were no significant differences between early and late respondents on ability [$t(436)$ = .70; p = .48]; task difficulty voting beliefs [$t(436)$ = -.80; p = .42]; task difficulty communication impact [$t(436)$ = .45; p = .66]; effort [$t(436)$ = 1.51; p = .13]; or motivation to engage in ANR policy [$t(436)$ = -.17; p = .86].

Sample

Participants in this study were members of Florida Farm Bureau (f = 306; 70%), Florida Cattlemen's Association (f = 299; 68%), Florida Fruit and Vegetable Association (f = 61; 14%), Wedgworth Leadership Institute (f = 59; 13%), and Florida Nursery, Growers and Landscape Association (f = 46; 10%; note that percentages may not add up to 100% due to the ability for respondents to be members of more than one organization). The majority of respondents were white (f = 403; 92%), and more respondents identified as male (f = 334; 76%) than female. The largest number of respondents were distributed evenly across age categories ranging from 30 to 69 years old, with few respondents 29 years of age or younger (f = 17; 4%) or 70 years of age or older (f = 46; 10%). More respondents (f = 167; 38%) reported a yearly household income $75,000 to $149,999 than any other income bracket. Regarding their political beliefs and affiliations, half of the respondents (f = 221; 50%) held conservative beliefs, and the majority (f = 321; 73%) identified as Republican. Lastly, half of the respondents (f = 221; 50%) lived on a farm in a rural area, and the majority (f = 348; 79%) were currently involved in agriculture for a living.

Instrument

A survey questionnaire developed by the researchers served as the instrument for this study. An expert panel reviewed the questionnaire for face and content validity. The panel consisted of three agricultural communication faculty members, executive directors from three Florida agricultural organizations, an agricultural organization policy director, a communications director, and one agricultural leadership organization director. The panel provided feedback to enhance the questionnaire's alignment with the goals of this study and the interests of the participating organizations. Recommendations for questionnaire edits included item inclusion, item wording, and response scale options. Edits were addressed by the researchers, and the panel deemed the final instrument acceptable. Post hoc reliability estimates were calculated using Cronbach's alpha and reported below. Field (2009) notes a Cronbach's alpha close to 0.80 is acceptable.

Ability

The first section of the instrument included eight items designed to assess respondents' perceived ability to engage successfully in ANR policy decisions (e.g., "I feel that I am qualified to contact my local, state, or national elected officials about issues that impact Florida agriculture"). Responses were collected using a five-point Likert scale of agreement: 1 = *strongly disagree;* 2 = *disagree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree*; 4 = *agree*; 5 = *strongly agree*. The internal reliability estimate for this scale was α = .86.

Task Difficulty

The next section of the instrument included measures of task difficulty. Respondents' beliefs about how elected officials prepare to vote on an ANR policy were measured using a set of six items reflective of favorable voting preparation measures taken by elected officials (e.g., "the local elected official would seek factual information"). Responses were collected using the previously mentioned five-point Likert agreement scale. The same six items and response scale were used three times in reference to either local elected officials, state legislators, and national legislators. Responses for local, state, and national officials were averaged for each item, and a construct mean was computed to represent respondents' overall favorable or unfavorable beliefs about how elected officials prepare to vote on policies that impacts ANR. The internal reliability estimate for this scale was $\alpha = .95$. Respondents were then asked to indicate the extent to which they believed communication from a farmer or rancher impacted by a proposed policy would impact a local, state, and national elected official's decision-making about the policy. Responses to the three items were collected using a five-point Likert-type scale: 1 = *no impact*; 2 = *slight impact*; 3 = *moderate impact*; 4 = *high impact*; 5 = *very high impact.* A mean score was computed to represent respondents' beliefs about the impact of their communication on elected officials' decision-making. The internal reliability estimate was .90.

Effort

Effort was measured in terms of whether AO members had previously contacted a local, state, or national elected official about an ANR policy (0 = no; 1 = yes). A summated score, with a possible range of 0 to 3, was computed.

Future Likeliness of Policy Engagement

The next section of the instrument was designed to assess the likeliness of respondents' future behavior in policy engagement. This section included four items intended to represent the various situations that may prompt AO members to contact an elected official about an ANR policy (e.g. "I would contact a local, state, or national elected official about legislation that has a direct impact on me"). Responses were collected using the same, previously mentioned five-point Likert scale of agreement. A construct mean was computed to represent respondents' overall likeliness of contacting an elected official. The internal reliability estimate for this scale was .90.

Data Analysis

Data for research objectives one through four were analyzed and reported using descriptive statistics (i.e., means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages). Multiple linear regression using stepwise entry method was employed for data analysis in research objective four. Prior to conducting multiple regression analysis, assumptions of normality, independence, homoscedasticity, linearity, and multicollinearity were tested and satisfied (Field, 2009).

Findings

Objective One

Objective one was to describe AO members' perceived ability to engage in ANR policy. Overall, respondents agreed they had the ability to engage in ANR policy (Construct *M* = 3.94; *SD* = .54). Respondents agreed most with the statements, "I believe contacting my local, state, or

national elected officials about issues affecting Florida agriculture is the responsible thing to do" ($M = 4.26$; $SD = .62$), "I believe it is important for me to contact my local, state, or national elected official about legislation impacting Florida agriculture" ($M = 4.17$; $SD = .70$), and "grassroots lobbying efforts are effective" ($M = 4.10$; $SD = .78$). Respondents agreed least with the statement, "local, state, or national elected officials generally listen to what agriculturalists have to say" ($M = 3.49$; $SD = .86$; see Table 2).

Table 2

Respondents' Perceived Ability to Engage and Impact ANR Policy

Item	M	SD	Interpretation
I believe contacting my local, state, or national elected officials about issues affecting Florida agriculture is the responsible thing to do.	4.26	.62	Agree
I believe it is important for me to contact my local, state, or national elected officials about legislation impacting Florida agriculture.	4.17	.70	Agree
Grassroots lobbying efforts are effective.	4.10	.78	Agree
I feel that I am qualified to contact my local, state, or national elected officials about issues that impact Florida agriculture.	4.01	.78	Agree
Others in my profession have successfully contact their local, state, or national elected officials about legislation that impacts them.	3.87	.71	Agree
By contacting my local, state, or national elected officials, I believe I can make a difference	3.85	.81	Agree
I feel I am able to write an effective letter to a local, state, or national elected official.	3.79	.87	Agree
I believe that local, state, or national elected officials generally listen to what agriculturalists (farmers, ranchers) have to say.	3.49	.86	Neither Agree nor Disagree

Ability Construct Mean = 3.94, *SD* = .54, Agree.
Note: Real Limits: 1.00 to 1.49 = *Disagree strongly,* 1.50 to 2.49 = *Disagree,* 2.50 to 3.49 = *Neither agree nor disagree,* 3.50 to 4.49 = *Agree,* 4.50 to 5.00 = *Agree strongly*

Objective Two

Objective two sought to describe AO members' perceived task difficulty of engaging in ANR policy in terms of their beliefs about how elected officials prepare to vote on a policy that impacts ANR. Respondents agreed most that local, state, and national elected officials would seek factual information ($M = 3.65$; $SD = .70$) and would ask others for their opinion on the matter ($M = 3.59$; $SD = .73$; see Table 3). They agreed least that the elected official would seek to fully understand the policy ($M = 3.42$; $SD = .81$).

Table 3

Respondents' Perceptions of How Elected Officials Prepare to Vote on ANR Policies

Item	M	SD	Interpretation
The elected official would seek factual information.	3.65	.70	Agree
The elected official would ask others for their opinion on the matter.	3.59	.73	Agree
The elected official would discuss his/her opinions with others.	3.57	.70	Agree
The elected official would seek information from multiple sources.	3.56	.744	Agree
The elected official would consider both the positive and negative implications that could result.	3.52	.77	Agree
The elected official would seek to fully understand the policy.	3.42	.81	Neither agree nor disagree

Voting Preparation Beliefs Construct Mean = 3.56, *SD* = .67, Agree.
Note: Real Limits: 1.00 to 1.49 = *Disagree strongly,* 1.50 to 2.49 = *Disagree,* 2.50 to 3.49 =
Neither agree nor disagree, 3.50 to 4.49 = *Agree,* 4.50 to 5.00 = *Agree strongly*

Objective Three

Objective three sought to describe the perceived impact of communication from a farmer or rancher on elected officials' decision-making when making ANR policy decisions. Findings suggest respondents believed communication from a farmer or rancher would have an overall high impact (M = 3.50; SD = .95) on elected officials' decision-making when making ANR policy decisions. Examination of their beliefs specific to the level of government of the official, respondents believed their communication would have the highest impact on local elected officials (M = 3.61; SD = .99), followed by state legislators (M = 3.59; SD = 1.00). They perceived their communication would have lower impact on national legislators (M = 3.31; SD = 1.13).

Objective Four

Objective four was to explain the extent to which AO members had put forth the effort to contact an elected official about a policy impacting ANR. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they had ever contacted one or more local elected officials, one or more state legislators, and one or more national legislators (0 = no; 1 = yes). A summated score was computed to represent respondents' overall efforts to contact their elected officials to engage in ANR policy. Scores ranged from 0 to 3, with a mean score of 1.94 (SD = 1.21). More than three-fourths of respondents (f = 348; 79.2%) had contacted one or more elected officials in at least one level of government. One-fifth (f = 89; 20.3%) had never contacted an elected official at any level of government. Descriptive results by level of government are provided in Table 4.

Table 4

Number of Respondents who had Contacted a Local, State, or National Elected Official

Level of Elected Official Contacted	*f*	%
Contacted one or more local elected officials (county commissioner, mayor, city council)	312	71.1
Contacted one or more state legislators	290	66.1
Contacted one or more national legislators	250	56.9

Note. Percentages do not add up to 100 due to ability to select more than one answer.

Objective Five

Objective five was concerned with the impact of attributions for success or failure on AO members' future interest in engaging in ANR policy. Multiple linear regression using stepwise entry method was employed to determine if respondents' perceived ability, task difficulty, and past effort predicted their likeliness of contacting an elected official about an ANR policy in the future. The best-fitted model was statistically significant ($F = 88.85$; $p < .001$) and explained 37.6% of the variance in future likeliness to contact an elected official about an ANR policy. Mean scores for the predictor variables were reported in the previous sections of the findings. The mean score for the criterion variable, i.e., future contact with an elected official, was 4.33 ($SD = .58$).

The predictor variables included in the accepted model were ability, task difficulty related to elected officials' voting preparation, and prior effort. The task difficulty predictor variable related to AO members' perceived impact of communication from a farmer or rancher on elected officials voting decisions did not contribute to the predictive ability and was not included in the accepted model (see Table 4). Respondents who had more positive beliefs in their abilities to engage with elected officials and impact ANR policy ($\beta = .625$; p-value = > .001) and had previously put forth more effort in contacting elected officials ($\beta = .054$; p-value = .014) were more likely to engage in ANR policy by contacting an elected official in the future. Respondents who held more favorable beliefs about how elected officials prepare to vote on ANR policies ($\beta = -0.77$; p-value = .033) were less likely to engage in ANR policy in the future (see Table 5).

Table 5

Best-fit Model of Attribution Variables and Future Likeliness to Contact an Elected Official About an ANR Policy

Variable	β	Std. Error	*t*	Std. β	*p*
Constant	2.03	.184	11.019	--	.000
Ability	.625	.051	12.14	.576	.000***
Task Difficulty-Voting Beliefs	-0.77	.036	-2.133	-.086	.033*
Effort	.054	.022	2.465	.110	.014*

Note. *p* <.05, **p* <.01, ****p* <.001. R^2 = .376 ($F = 88.85$, $p < .001$)

Conclusions, Discussion, and Recommendations

This study examined the impact of AO members' perceptions, abilities, and prior efforts on their likeliness of contacting an elected official and engaging in ANR policy. Regarding AO members' perceptions and beliefs about engaging in ANR policy, members in this study demonstrated fairly positive perceptions of their policy engagement and abilities to do so. Specifically, members believed contacting their local, state, or national elected officials about a

policy impacting ANR was a responsible and important thing to do, and they believed grassroots lobbying efforts were effective in shaping ANR policy. They agreed slightly less that they were confident writing a letter to an elected official about an ANR policy and that elected officials would actually listen to what agriculturalists, e.g., farmers and ranchers, have to say about a policy.

Most AO members in this study had previously contacted one or more elected officials at the local, state, and/or national levels. However, one-fifth of respondents had never contacted any elected official about an ANR policy. Of those who had, a larger number had contacted a local elected official, while fewer had contacted a state or national legislator. AO members also held generally favorable beliefs regarding how elected officials prepare to vote on policies impacting ANR, indicating they perceived low difficulty in engaging with elected officials to influence policy decisions. Further, AO members perceived communication from a farmer or rancher as having a high impact on an elected official's ANR policy decision.

They reported higher perceived impact of such communication at the local level of government than with state or national legislators, which may explain why a larger number of respondents had previously contacted a local official than one at the state and national levels. In a prior study conducted with county commissioners, Lawson et al. (2020) found county commissioners were most impacted by communication from a farmer or rancher when making ANR policy decisions. Such information should be shared with AO members who have not sought to engage in ANR policy and/or are less convinced of the impact of their communication on influencing policy decisions. Training opportunities should be provided to AO members to help increase their abilities to communicate with elected officials.

AO members' perceptions of their abilities to engage in ANR policy, their beliefs about how elected officials prepare to vote, and their prior efforts to contact an elected official were significant predictors of their future motivation to contact an elected official about an ANR policy. AO members who held more positive perceptions of their abilities and had previously put forth more effort to contact an elected official indicated greater likeliness to engage in ANR policy in the future. These findings were consistent with Weiner's (1972) attribution theory (AT) and suggest AO members may attribute their likeliness of future success at engaging in ANR policy to their perceived ability to do so and past effort. As such, efforts should be made by organizational leaders to convey to their members the importance of grassroots efforts, particularly the role of agriculturalists (e.g. farmers, ranchers, etc.), in shaping future policy. Organizational leaders should also seek to incorporate educational seminars or training opportunities to help equip their members with the skills they need to engage effectively with their elected officials and foster their perceived ability to do so. It also may be beneficial to invite AO members who have previously engaged with elected officials to share their stories with other members at these training seminars or workshops.

Regression analyses revealed AO members who held more favorable beliefs about how elected officials prepare to vote were less likely to engage in ANR policy. These findings were not in line with the predicted relationships per AT (Weiner, 1972) and may indicate AO members' favorable or unfavorable beliefs about how elected officials prepare to vote on polices impacting ANR is not an ideal measure of task difficulty. A possible reason for this finding may be that an AO member with more favorable beliefs has greater confidence in elected officials' capabilities to make informed decisions, which may in turn reduce their motivation to contact their elected officials about the policy. Individual or group interviews could be conducted with AO members to gain a better understanding of their perceived task difficulties or challenges experienced when trying to contact an elected official and influence ANR policy decisions. Per the AT (Weiner, 1972), reducing AO members' perceived level of task difficulty in contacting elected officials could increase their perceived likelihood of success. Qualitative analyses of these findings should then

be used to inform the development of a measure of task difficulty for replication of this study using the newly developed task difficulty construct.

Future research should be conducted with AO members who have contacted an elected official to examine the primary challenges faced in doing so. Such research could examine why those members sought communication with their elected official(s) and their perceived best methods of doing so. Future research should also be conducted with AO members who have not contacted an elected official to identify factors not explored in this study that may hinder their engagement. As AO members in this study included those from agricultural leadership and commodity organizations, future research of this nature should include other agricultural interests groups, such as farmers' cooperatives, youth groups, think tanks, organizations related to farm investments and finance, ANR media, or other non-governmental organizations serving farming communities. Lastly, as *luck* (Weiner, 1972) was not examined in this study, future consideration should be given to methods of measuring how luck manifests in AO members' policy engagement behaviors.

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