

1. Advise a country of your choice on adopting a citizenship policy change. This could, for example, be the introduction of a citizenship-by-investment policy. Why should the country adopt the policy? What arguments and evidence can you provide to support your case?

Citizenship Policy Proposal for non-citizen Farmworkers

America's food system relies heavily on the grueling, strenuous work of farmworkers. This workforce is composed of 68% immigrants, 20% of whom came to the U.S. through the H-2A temporary agricultural workers visa program and only 7% have attained U.S. citizenship. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) has estimated that from 2020-2022, 42% of America's farmworkers were not authorized to be in the U.S. (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2025a). Yet, significant labor and immigration reform to include this essential workforce as citizen has not taken place. In fact, the viability of the U.S.'s agricultural sector to compete in a global economy depends on these workers being stuck in a system in which they never gain the same rights as citizens. This model is leading to vast labor rights violations, abusive conditions, wage deflation for domestic workers, and an agricultural industry that is stuck either utilizing unethical practices or going out of business.

The U.S. must adopt a new citizenship policy that grants migrant farmworkers a pathway to citizenship, in order to put an end to structural labor injustices, ensure fair wages for current citizens and ensure a humane food supply chain. By blocking H-2A farmworker from obtaining citizenship, the current program is skewing the natural market forces that would protect workers' rights and wages. By allowing H-2A farmworkers to become citizens, the natural market forces can help correct this issue. To make this new policy viable, however, farm subsidies must be shifted to allow farmers to give fair wages, instead of relying on a labor supply they can exploit. To support this new program, the U.S. should overhaul its \$85.6 billion farm subsidy program away from supporting highly efficient large scale industrial crops, to labor intensive crops (Edwards, 2023). These subsidies will allow the agricultural sector to invest in labor inputs without raising prices of their finished goods. These two policies work together to create the economic conditions for U.S. agriculture to compete in a global market, without lowering labor standards.

Background and Legal Framework

The original goal of limiting legal status of non-citizen farmworkers was to stop non-citizens from competing with citizens for jobs (Rivière, C. Y., 2023). Visas from the H-2A

temporary agricultural workers program are tied to a specific job at a specific employer (Maldonado, C. M., 2025). The freedom to choose a job allows citizens to compete in a labor market in which industry is competing for labor, increasing labor standards. The H-2A visa program, however, traps non-citizen workers in jobs by tying their legal status to a single employer. This eliminates competition for labor and creates a monopsony like situation. If a worker is tied to one employer, it is eventually the same thing as only one employer existing. This in an environment with extreme moral hazard, where employers hold an unequal amount of power over workers, who risk deportation if they leave abusive or unfair working conditions. By creating a class of worker that cannot "vote with their feet" and leave their job without losing their visa, the U.S. has created a labor market outside of the protections of a free market (Rivière, C. Y., 2023).

Evidence of Labor Abuse

H-2A and non-documented farmworkers (non-citizen farmworkers) are some of the most vulnerable workers in the U.S. They work in remote areas and have few options for reporting abuses. This "lack of portability" has been identified as a main cause of exploitation, mistreatment, and labor trafficking in the agricultural industry employer (Maldonado, C. M., 2025). H-2A and non-documented farmworkers often come from extremely impoverished backgrounds. Many of them make less than \$5 a day in their home country. This impoverishment leads them to the U.S. where they often endure what some call a "nightmare" in order to support their families back home (Maldonado, C. M., 2025).

Common abuses due to this vulnerability within agriculture included wage theft, illegal deductions, and nonpayment of overtime (Escalante & Taylor, 2024). Employers know that non-citizen workers are less likely to complain due to their fear of losing their job and legal status, not being hired back the next year, or having deportation officers called on them (Guernsey, 2007). Investigations have shown that since 2020, more than 5,000 workers have been the victims of almost \$6 million in wage theft. The average wage theft violations for H-2A at \$16,416.20 is much higher than the average of \$8,432.45 for other sectors (Escalante & Taylor, 2024). Many non-citizen farmworkers from Mexico take on debt of \$2,000-\$8,000 by paying

illegal recruitment fees. These loans often will have excessive interest rates of 5-79% trapping them in debt indefinitely (Maldonado, 2025).

Non-citizen farmworkers often face harsh and unsafe working conditions. Farm work consistently ranks among the most dangerous occupations in the U.S. due to its physically demanding nature, long hours, and exposure to chemical hazards (Castillo & Charlton, 2023). The remote working conditions also put these workers out of view from outside witnesses. Injury rates for non-citizen farmworkers are very hard to determine due to the fact that injuries are self-reported (Summerfield, 2024). The Department of Labor's (DOL) Wage and Hour Division (WHD) is in meant to be auditing farms to stop these violations. However, this division is often understaffed and cannot investigate a large portion of violations. The lack of protections and consequences creates a "climate of fear" for non-citizen workers, forcing them to tolerate these abuses to support their families, avoid legal trouble, and be hired again for the next harvest season (Escalante & Taylor, 2024).

The Current H-2A Program Creates a Monopolistic Market

By taking away choice from non-citizen workers, the system creates a workforce from which employers can extract more outputs for fewer inputs than citizens would require. The monopsony created by tying non-citizens legal status to one employer creates a market in which employers can have wages and labor conditions below market rates creating deadweight loss for these workers. We see this deadweight loss in farmworker wages. Even though employers claim there are labor shortages in the agriculture sector, both citizen and non-citizen farmworkers are amongst the lowest paid workers in the U.S. (Costa, 2023). Basic micro economic theory suggests that when there are labor shortages, wages should be going up. In 2022, farmworkers earned about the same hourly wage as workers who did not receive any high school education, despite about 40% of them having completed some or all of a high school education. Farmworkers earned about 60% less than production and nonsupervisory workers with similar educational backgrounds (Costa, 2023). The U.S. has enabled farm employers to reduce compensation and relax labor standards so much that job listings do not compete in the domestic U.S. job market. This policy structure is hurting U.S. citizens as well as non-citizens.

The U.S. does attempt to make employers compete for citizen worker by setting a specific agriculture minimum wage through to Adverse Effect Wage Rate (AEWR). This minimum wage is supposed to bring non-citizen farmworkers minimum wage up to the level that a domestic worker would expect. This is supposed to even out the market and prevent non-citizen workers from undercutting citizen workers (Guernsey, 2007). However, this program has been shown to be ineffective. The moral hazard created when promised wages are unpaid, combined with evidence that the AEWR does not mitigate the deadweight loss caused by binding migrant workers to specific employers, displays the failure of the current system (Escalante, 2024).

Globalization has Made Current Citizen Workers a Non-Viable Options

As the U.S. shifted toward globalization in the 20th century, it became harder to find steady well-paying jobs manufacturing. Companies in the U.S. had to compete with products coming in from countries where labor costs were much lower. This includes food, whose real prices have fallen because as a result (Autor, 2016).

To compete, many U.S. companies moved their manufacturing overseas, and the U.S. work force shifted towards higher paid jobs, improving much of the population's living standards (Simnitt, 2018). As American's received goods and agricultural products from overseas, these items became cheaper for Americans. Due to increased globalization farms in the U.S. had to compete with farms around the world (Rivière, 2023). Unlike lower paid manufacturing jobs however, many farming operations cannot be moved overseas to take advantage of cheaper labor. Crops can only be grown in specific locations with the correct climate, they have shipping limitations, and the U.S. needs food grown domestically for national security (The White House, 2022). Farms consolidated, grew larger and reduced competition in the labor market. In order to compete in a global market, farming became more commodity driven. Profits became dependent on producing high volumes, and increasing productivity. Farmers needed to changes the means and methods of production to become more efficient. (White & Hoppe, 2012).

Citizen workers became unwilling to work at the efficiency levels and for the wages required for these farmers to compete in the global market. These workers found other jobs

(Simnitt, 2018). In 1986, the U.S. amended their migrant worker program to include the first iteration of a visa specifically designated for short term agricultural worker. The stated goal was to fill the gap in seasonal labor not being filled by domestic workers (Castillo & Charlton, 2023). However, questions remain if there is actually a lack of domestic workers or whether farm labor has become so devalued, brutal, and dangerous that domestic workers would have a better life being unemployed than working in these jobs (Guernsey, 2007).

As the U.S.'s economy grew, and living standards rose from year to year the economy needed more investment to produce the same level of output. Commodity crops were able to improve their methods of production through technological advancements that have lowered the need for labor inputs while creating more output. However, specialty, high labor crops which included much of the U.S.'s fruits and vegetables have not seen many technological advancements that have improved output (Simnitt., 2018). Specialty crops use 60% of the H-2A farm labor (AgAmerica, 2020). Because these employers have not been able to create better methods of production, they have needed to increase the value of the means of production. They have done this by lowering labor standards, demanding more output from each worker and lowering wages. The global food economy creates conditions that require U.S. farmers to exploit their workers, disobey labor laws, and commit wage theft to stay in business. Farmers need a workforce who cannot complain, cannot leave, and cannot report them (Maldonado, 2025). Based on these economic factors, just creating a path for citizenship for farmworkers without economic interventions will not result in better working conditions for farmworkers.

To make this policy economically viable for U.S. farmers, the U.S. should reallocate agricultural subsidies away from commodity crops, like corn and soy, and to high labor specialty crops could help make up for these market conditions, allowing farmers to pay competitive wages. Raising the wages of the 2.07 million non-supervisory farmworkers who make up about 83% of all farmworkers in the U.S. would require about a quarter of the U.S.'s current agricultural subsidies (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2025a; Costa, 2023). The average annual income in 2017 for these farmworkers was roughly \$23,730 (Simnitt, 2018). Increasing their wages by 40%, to the level of similarly educated workers in other sectors within the U.S., would cost the U.S. around \$19.6 billion. This equals about 23% of the \$85.6 billion spent annual in farm subsidies (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2025b). This shows that the U.S. can afford to

raise wages and give farmworkers citizenship and the rights that come with that, if it can reprioritize its agricultural spending.

Citizenship Policy Recommendation

The U.S.'s agricultural system will always be reduced to these unethical ways if immigration and citizenship policy does not change. By allowing H-2A visa holders to have a path to citizenship the U.S. will secure a needed labor force, rectify injustices that are currently taking place, and would promote more ethical labor practices. To create a steady workforce of farmworkers this pathway to citizenship would be tied to the occupation of agricultural labor, not to a specific job or employer for the years leading up to citizenship and for a specific time period after gaining citizenship. This framework ensures that farmworkers have the freedom to leave abusive jobs, eliminating the monopsonies in the agricultural job market created by the H-2A program.

This framework also strengthens workers' rights while incentivizing a crucial labor force to stay in the U.S. The agricultural sector often reports labor shortages and spends a lot of time and money recruiting H-2A workers. By allowing this workforce to become citizens, the U.S. will create a steadier labor force that is protected from future changes in American sentiment towards migrants (Castillo & Charlton, 2023). The H-2A visa was designed to secure a temporary workforce to fill in gaps where needed. However, with the U.S. relying on 68% of farm labor to be provided by non-citizens (U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2025). It is time to make a change. The use of H-2A visa has increased 450% from 2001 to 2019. During the COVID-19 pandemic, farmworkers were considered essential workers that the U.S. needed to feed its population (Castillo & Charlton, 2023). It is risky to rely on a non-citizen workforce for such a crucial item as food. Allowing this labor force to become citizens will incentivize them to stay and work in the U.S. for years to come by giving them the security of being able to stay in U.S., make long term life plans.

By requiring these new citizens to remain in the agricultural sector for a specific amount of time after they become citizen, this also guarantees a portion of this workforce now has the right to vote, giving farmworker representation. Over time, this representation should lead to

better laws protecting farmworkers. Currently, having such a high percentage of farmworkers remain as non-citizens, labor laws and regulations have become severely skewed in favor of employers. Non-citizens do not have the right to vote and therefore it is next to impossible for them to have representation during the law writing process.

For many years the agricultural industry has fought for the right to lower labor standards, which has resulted in many agricultural jobs being exempt from many federal labor protection policies. They are exempt from federal overtime pay rules under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) and the right to organize and collectively bargain under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) (Maldonado, 2025). "Citizenship is a legal designation of status and as a form of social membership in a community" (Goodman, 2022). The U.S. has created these working conditions by purposely excluding this labor force from the community of America. They are seen as outsiders, other than, and in some cases even criminals.

In recent years, populism has risen in the U.S. Politicians have turned to non-citizen farmworkers as scapegoats for economic hardships. The Trump administration has begun to focus on deterring immigration to the U.S. by using harsher enforcement tactics. The Trump administration claims to be going after "the worst of the worst," while doing workplace raids on farms. They are equating non-citizen farmworkers, some of whom have obtained work authorization and some whom have not, with gang members, rapists, and drug dealers. President Trump has justified a stronger immigration enforcement by using typical dehumanization language. He has called migrants "migrant criminals," "Illegal monster[s]," "killers," and "gang members." He has said they are "poisoning our country," and "taking your jobs." He has equated the flow of migrants to an "invasion" (The Marshall Project Staff, 2024). It is clear that the current presidential administration does not think of this workforce as part of the American community and in fact as a detriment to the American community. In 2025, the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) under the Trump administration started targeting immigrants not for committing crimes, but for speaking out on many topics including farmworkers rights. In April, ICE detained farmworker advocate Alfredo "Lelo" Juarez as he was dropping his partner off at work. Juarez is a well-known activist in Washington State. He advocates for farmworkers' basic rights, including overtime pay and protections from extreme heat. Juarez does not have

authorization to be in the U.S. and has had an order of removal since 2018. However, does not have a criminal record and it is believed that he was targeted for his advocacy (Poydock, 2025).

By opening up a path to citizenship for these workers, the U.S. will ensure the safety of farmworkers, protect them from government administrations that threatens them due to their difference in status. It makes more economic sense to protect this workforce by giving them a path to citizenship than to deport them. While it is still early in the Trump Administration's crack down, there are signs of negative impacts. Crops that are ready to be picked are rotting in the field, creating economic hardship for farmers and decreasing food supply. Anecdotal evidence has shown large losses for farmers. A cherry farmer in Mattawa, Washington has lost about 120,000 pounds of cherries in 2025 due to their farmworkers being too afraid to show up for work. Cherry farmers in Washington that typically host 100-120 farmworkers have said that they are having 20 to 30 workers show up this year (Clouse, 2025). By passing this new immigration and citizenship policy, the U.S. can create a safer, more reliable and economically viable food supply for the workers and the country as a whole.

Conclusion

The U.S. has relied for far too long on the exploitation of Mexican and South American farmworkers to feed the country. Economic conditions and little representation have driven the U.S. into system that needs economic interventions as well as new immigration and citizen policy. The freedom to have safe and gainful employment must be extended to U.S. farmworkers who the U.S. relies upon for food. To support the implications of giving farmworkers these rights, the U.S. must shift the subsidies currently supporting large industrial farmers to farmers who are growing labor intensive crops. These new policies will address the common problems in the food supply chain often invisible to consumers in the grocery store. Granting citizenship to this workforce is an acknowledgement that these workers belong in the U.S. and their contributions are important to the wellbeing of the country.

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