

The territorialisation of public policy-making reflects differences in the way social needs for older people are identified and addressed

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*By 2050, for the first time in human history, older people will outnumber the population of children. **Paul Chaney** argues that this presents specific challenges and opportunities in the pursuit of electoral support; policy proposals will be increasingly tailored to older voters and territorialized, leading to the rise of different welfare rights and modes of social citizenship in the constituent polities of the quasi-federal state.*



The demands of an ageing society, the need to appeal to older voters, and a legal framework requiring the promotion of age equality are among the contemporary challenges facing political parties. My [research article](#) in the British Journal of Politics and International Relations explores their response with reference to the issue salience of public policy for older people in the manifestos for Westminster and regional elections in the UK, 1945–2011.

The concept of public policy for older people here refers to targeted legal and policy interventions that have a potentially significant role in advancing the rights, equality and the material self-interest of older citizens. Such a focus therefore provides an insight into parties' prioritisation of age matters in multi-tier elections and their policy programmes for a world in which, by 2050, older people will outnumber the population of children (0–14 years) for the first time in human history. Accordingly, my analysis relates to the contemporary political reality that in ageing societies and cohort-based differential turnout present specific challenges and opportunities in political parties' pursuit of electoral support.

Specifically, the paper adds to the literature on issue-salience. This refers to the importance of an issue for a given party in a particular election (cf. RePass 1971). In this exploration of generational politics three hypotheses are addressed: (1) when policy proposals in post-war party manifestos are examined there is evidence of increased salience of age cohorts in electoral competition; (2) the framing of policy proposals targeted at older people reflects the core tenets of equalities theory and UN Principles on the Rights of Older Persons; and (3) in quasi-federal states territorialisation of public policy-making reflects differences in the way social needs for older people are identified, prioritised and addressed.

The UK research context can be summarised as one in which by 2034, 23 per cent of the population is forecast to be aged 65 years and over. Significant differences exist in the percentage of the population aged 65+ years in each of the UK's polities (figures in parentheses are estimates for 2025): England 18.6 (19.4), Scotland 19.1 (21.3), Wales 20.5 (22.2) and Northern Ireland 16.3 (18.1).

The methodology used in the analysis combines qualitative and quantitative analysis of party programmes; specifically, content and critical discourse analysis. Inter alia, the principal findings reveal: (1) a significant increase in issue salience and electoral competition around public policy for older people in the post-war era; (2) a continuing failure to adhere to EC and UN edicts on the need to mainstream older people's equality and welfare across portfolios and policy frames; and (3) the territorialisation of public policy based on inter- and intra-party differences in policy programmes as part of a formative process associated with the political opportunity structures afforded by quasi-federalism.

The qualitative dimension to the research provides insight into the framing in the manifesto discourse – such as the way that the parties advanced the case for constructing a welfare state to meet older people’s needs:

- ‘*Old age throws heavy burdens upon the family income. One of our most important tasks will be to pass into law, and bring into action as soon as we can, a nation-wide and compulsory scheme of National Insurance based on the plan announced by the Government of all Parties in 1944*’—Conservative Party 1945, 3
- ‘*Labour has shown its determination to give the old people [sic] a square deal. The guiding principle of our policy is that old age should be a time of recreation and useful service, not a burden of loneliness and sorrow*’—Labour Party 1950, 4
- ‘*Mankind is a prey to fear of poverty and want through ... old age. With the schemes for social security and full employment, the Liberal Party leads a frontal attack on this fear*’—Liberal Party 1945, 5.

In post-war state-wide UK elections the Conservative party emerges with the most references to policy on older people at 37.9 per cent (principally, though not exclusively, on state pension arrangements); compared to Labour 33.2 per cent; and Liberal Democrats 28.9 per cent. When regional elections are factored in, content analysis comparing policy proposals in party manifestos from elections in 1998–2001 with those of 2010–11 gives further insight into the changing salience of older people’s issues over time. Incidences of key terms associated with older people’s policy increased in the manifestos of 12 of the 16 parties studied (in half of these it more than doubled). Overall, there was an increase of 41 percentage points over the period.

Thus the impact of devolution on older people’s public policy is shown to be significant. Overall, the evidence from both regional and general elections 1998–2011 reveals a significant shift away from the pre-devolution practice that spanned the previous five decades whereby centralised policy prescriptions for older people were set out in parties’ state-wide manifestos. Accordingly, the findings support the hypothesis that, in quasi-federal states, the territorialisation of public policy-making reflects differences in the way social needs for older people are identified, prioritised and addressed. This is driven by significant *intra*- and *inter*-party variation in issue salience. It underpins the territorialisation of policy for older people and leading to the rise of different welfare rights and modes of social citizenship in the constituent polities of the quasi-federal state.

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Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics.

About the author

Paul Chaney is co-editor of the academic journal [Contemporary Wales](#) and a member of the editorial management board of the journal [Policy and Politics](#). He is Welsh co-representative on the UK Government’s Department of Trade and Industry’s (DTI) Taskforce and Steering Group concerned with establishing the Commission on Equality and Human Rights (CEHR), a new single equality body that will replace the existing statutory GB equality commissions.

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