

Research on the Delayed Retirement Policy Based on a Multi-Source Flow Analysis Model

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Abstract: On September 13, 2024, to thoroughly implement the CPC Central Committee's decisions on progressively raising the statutory retirement age and adapt to China's evolving demographic landscape while optimizing human resource utilization, the 11th Session of the Standing Committee of the 14th National People's Congress adopted the "Decision on Implementing Progressive Delay of the Statutory Retirement Age" in accordance with the Constitution. The announcement sparked extensive public debate. This paper employs a multi-source analysis model to examine the formation process and development trends of the delayed retirement policy across three dimensions: problem sources, policy sources, and political sources. The study reveals that population aging and changes in labor market structure constitute the problem sources; discussions and recommendations from experts and research institutions form the policy sources; while government strategic planning and public attitudes represent the political sources. The convergence of these three sources during a critical policy window facilitated the implementation of the delayed retirement policy.

Keywords: Delayed Retirement Policy; Multi-Source Flow Analysis Model; Policy Agenda

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of the new era, China's socio-economic structure has undergone continuous transformation and upgrading, with high-quality economic development advancing steadily. Concurrently, the national population structure, labor supply landscape, and social pension system have experienced comprehensive and profound changes. Population development trends now exhibit distinct characteristics of

overall stabilization, structural transformation, and accelerated aging, profoundly impacting societal operations, labor market dynamics, and the sustainable development of the livelihood security system.

According to the latest population monitoring data released by the National Bureau of Statistics, China's population aging pattern has entered a new phase with continuously deepening trends. Currently, the proportion of individuals aged 60 and above accounts for 22% of the total population, while those aged 65 and above reach as high as 15.6%. Under internationally recognized criteria, a population share of 7% at age 65 or older indicates entry into an aging society, while 14% signifies a moderately aging society—meaning China has officially entered this category. Authoritative demographic projections suggest the aging process will persist, with the country expected to transition to severe aging by 2035, during which the elderly population share will rise further and demographic imbalances become more pronounced. To effectively address risks posed by population aging, optimize labor resource allocation, enhance social security systems, and achieve long-term balanced population development, the gradual policy of raising the statutory retirement age has emerged as a core reform measure. This initiative marks China's shift from theoretical exploration and policy discussions to practical implementation of its retirement age reform efforts, demonstrating a significant step forward in addressing demographic challenges.

The introduction of the delayed retirement policy was not driven by a single factor, but rather resulted from the combined effects of multiple elements including demographic changes, societal development needs, improvements in the policy framework, and strategic planning at the highest level. The process of agenda-setting, policy formulation, and implementation involved complex policy logic and mechanisms. Building on this

foundation, this paper employs John Kingdon's multi-stream analysis model to systematically examine the evolution of the delayed retirement policy across three core dimensions-problem origins, policy origins, and political origins-while incorporating key factors such as the launch of policy initiatives and contributions from policy advocates. It provides a detailed analysis of the core mechanisms, driving forces, and underlying logic behind the policy's development, offering robust theoretical support and research insights for understanding China's pension security reforms and enhancing its proactive approach to addressing population aging.

2. Delayed Retirement Policy

On September 13, 2024, the Chinese government approved the "State Council's Measures for Gradually Delaying the Statutory Retirement Age," which will take effect on January 1, 2025. This reform simultaneously adjusts the statutory retirement ages for both male and female employees, with a 15-year transition period planned to ensure smooth implementation. Under the new regulations, the retirement age for male employees will be gradually raised from the current 60 years to 63 years, while the existing two thresholds of 50 and 55 years for female employees will be extended to 55 and 58 years respectively. To ensure a steady roll out, the policy strictly adheres to four principles: incremental adjustments, flexible implementation, categorized advancement, and comprehensive consideration. This phased approach effectively mitigates systemic impacts, accommodates diverse workforce characteristics, and balances social employment needs, social security operations, and public welfare concerns. The long-awaited reform represents a pivotal step in China's proactive adaptation to demographic changes and addressing moderate aging, marking the full transition of the retirement delay initiative from planning to practical execution.

3. Overview of the Multi-Source Flow Analysis Model

Building upon the "waste bin" model proposed by March and Olson, American scholar John Kingdon integrated the practical mechanisms of public policy agenda-setting to further refine and develop a multi-stream analytical framework specifically designed for explaining the process

of policy agenda formation. This model transcends the limitations of traditional rational decision-making theory and challenges the conventional view that policy formulation is a step-by-step process entirely based on scientific reasoning, accurately capturing the contingent nature, complexity, and dynamism inherent in public policy agenda-setting. Kingdon explicitly identifies three core streams-the problem stream, the policy stream, and the political stream-as fundamental components of the agenda-building process. These streams operate independently during the policy formulation stage without interference, each possessing distinct formation logic, driving mechanisms, and developmental characteristics that evolve according to their own patterns, thereby laying the groundwork for subsequent policy implementation opportunities and effective policy execution.

3.1 The Root Cause of the Problem

In the context of public governance, a multitude of social issues persist continuously, yet not all of them reach the government's attention or become public policy priorities. Only those problems with distinct characteristics that are recognized by both society and authorities can evolve into genuine sources of concern. The widespread recognition of these issues and their prominence among complex social contradictions primarily stem from three core mechanisms. First, quantitative indicators play a pivotal role: various social statistics, monitoring metrics, and research data vividly reveal systemic shortcomings and conflicts in society, clearly demonstrating the scope, severity, and trends of these issues while underscoring the critical importance of addressing them-thus providing objective evidence for identification. Second, focal events drive attention: sudden public crises, landmark social incidents, or exposure of industry-wide challenges rapidly capture public and governmental focus, disrupting routine governance patterns and bringing previously overlooked issues to light. Finally, feedback mechanisms within existing public programs and policies enable governments to continuously gather grassroots insights, public demands, and operational gaps during policy implementation, service delivery, and governance processes. Through regular reviews and analysis, they promptly identify deficiencies in current systems and governance models, ensuring potential social issues are

accurately identified and incorporated into governance strategies.

3.2 Policy Origins (the "Original Blueprint")

When social issues are recognized by both the public and governments as having clear origins, this merely indicates the necessity for governance intervention, but does not guarantee their smooth inclusion in policymakers' core policy agendas. For such issues to transition from societal concerns to policy-level considerations, they must be supported by mature, feasible, and scientifically grounded policy frameworks-this constitutes the fundamental value of policy origination. These frameworks are primarily developed by specialized groups including experts in public administration, sociology, economics, policy researchers, and industry practitioners. These professionals conduct systematic investigations, theoretical analyses, scenario simulations, and feasibility assessments focused on pressing social challenges, integrating current social conditions, governance realities, and public demands to refine and iterate a series of practical, adaptable, and scientifically sound alternative solutions and policy recommendations. The long-term accumulation and continuous refinement of these policy proposals, theoretical insights, and governance approaches collectively form the "original foundation" of policy development, providing essential resource pools, theoretical support, and technical foundations for initiating policy agendas and establishing institutional frameworks. This process serves as the pivotal bridge connecting social issues with effective policy implementation.

3.3 Political Origins

The political origin serves as the core external driving force shaping policy agenda-setting and a pivotal political condition determining the successful implementation of policies. Its components encompass multiple factors related to politics and social governance, including public sentiment, power struggles among interest groups, government leadership transitions, shifts in parliamentary composition, and key personnel adjustments within administrative institutions. Among these, public sentiment stands as the most direct influencing factor: widespread societal demands, media narratives, and people's expectations directly shape the focus of governmental governance, prioritizing public

issues that align with popular will and social consensus-sometimes even placing critical livelihood matters and hot-button social issues at the heart of policy decisions. Concurrently, negotiations between interest groups, adjustments in national political landscapes, and personnel changes or functional restructurings within administrative systems collectively reshape policy directions and alter the external environment for policy advancement. Unlike problem origins and policy origins, which operate through data-driven, theoretical, and rational analysis, the equilibrium dynamics among various stakeholders in political origins rely not solely on scientific theories or rational persuasion but rather on the strategic artistry of governance. Through multi-party consultations, interest compromises, and strategic bargaining, conflicts are resolved and diverse interests balanced, ultimately forging a development framework that aligns with both political realities and broader governance objectives.

The three fundamental streams of issues, policies, and politics operate independently during the initial stages of policy formulation, evolving separately without mutual interference. The activation of a policy window represents the critical juncture where these three streams converge and integrate. When specific social or political opportunities arise, the policy window officially opens, enabling the previously independent streams to deeply interconnect and collaborate synergistically. This process transforms fragmented social issues, policy proposals, and political conditions into a cohesive force that formally elevates corresponding public concerns onto the government's policy agenda. The brief period of the policy window also constitutes a pivotal opportunity for policymakers, researchers, and governance stakeholders: it allows them to implement well-developed solutions while leveraging public interest to amplify attention toward social issues and consolidate consensus on governance. Notably, policy windows exhibit strong timeliness-with short durations and rapid closure-representing valuable, phased opportunities for governance. Failure by stakeholders to seize these windows promptly and achieve effective convergence of the three streams will result in temporary suspension of relevant policy initiatives, forcing participants to await subsequent opportunities and delaying policy advancement.

4. Multi-Source Analysis of the Delayed Retirement Policy

4.1 Analysis of the Root Causes of the Delayed Retirement Policy

4.1.1. Accelerated population aging

With the extension of average life expectancy and the decline in birth rates, China's population aging trend continues to intensify. According to data from the National Bureau of Statistics, the number of newborns in China in 2024 was only 9.54 million—a figure lower than the number of deaths—indicating sustained negative population growth. Additionally, the population aged 60 and above accounted for 19.8% of the national total in 2022; this proportion rose to 21.1% in 2023; and by 2025, it is projected to reach 22% of the total population, with those aged 65 and above accounting for a significant 15.6%. By 2035, this ratio is expected to further increase, marking a transition to severe aging. The declining birth rate has exacerbated population aging, leading to reduced labor supply and increased pension burdens, which impose substantial pressure on the social pension insurance system.

4.1.2. Changes in the Labor Market Structure

First, with the transformation and upgrading of the economic structure, the labor market's demand for highly qualified and skilled workers continues to grow. This trend runs counter to the current reality among young people, who prioritize academic qualifications and personal freedom and are reluctant to enter the labor market. The delayed retirement policy helps fully leverage the value of experienced workers and addresses the current shortage of labor in the market. Second, against the backdrop of a steadily declining birth rate, the size of the working-age population is gradually shrinking. Additionally, the seventh national population census revealed that China's working-age population has decreased by over 36 million compared to 2010. Data indicates that more than 40 million people will retire during the 14th Five-Year Plan period, resulting in a net reduction of 35 million working-age individuals. The growing imbalance between labor supply and demand severely impacts China's socioeconomic development, and delayed retirement can alleviate the labor shortage to some extent. Third, in 2023, China's average life expectancy reached 78.6 years—an increase of

approximately 38 years since the nation's founding. Although China's retirement policies have undergone dynamic adjustments since their official introduction in 1951, no significant changes have been made to adapt to these new developments. The extended life expectancy means that retirees still possess strong labor capacity.

4.1.3. Increasing financial pressure on pension insurance funds

Against the backdrop of an aging population, China faces a growing annual number of retirees, leading to continuously rising expenditures for pension insurance funds and excessive payment pressures. Meanwhile, the number of contributors has relatively declined due to falling birth rates. A contradiction exists between pension expenditure and contribution levels, with the fund's revenue-expenditure gap gradually widening. Consequently, the original statutory retirement age fails to ensure the sustainability of pension insurance funds, posing significant challenges to China's social security system and eroding public trust in it. According to calculations by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, China's pension insurance fund reserves will be depleted by 2035. Therefore, delaying the retirement age has become an inevitable measure to maintain the sustainability of the pension insurance system.

4.2 Analysis of the Policy Origins of the Delayed Retirement Policy

4.2.1. Research and Recommendations by Experts and Scholars

For decades, experts and scholars have conducted extensive and in-depth research on delayed retirement policies. From perspectives such as economics, sociology, and demography, they have demonstrated the necessity and feasibility of delaying retirement while proposing concrete policy recommendations that provide theoretical support and intellectual guidance for policymakers. Some experts argue that mandatory retirement policies contradict human life cycles—specifically, labor capacity should increase with extended lifespan. Individuals aged 50–60 still possess substantial human capital, and many technically skilled retirees with solid professional expertise can continue working independently, skills that young people lack but enterprises urgently need. Professor Gong Liutang of Peking University's Guanghua School of Management and his

collaborators found that raising the retirement age reduces the time available for intergenerational care among the elderly, exerting opposing effects on human capital. This insight contributed significantly to advocating for delayed retirement policies. In 2008, the head of the Social Security Research Institute under the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security stated that relevant authorities were investigating the societal prerequisites for delayed retirement, emphasizing it would become an inevitable trend in China's pension policy adjustments. In 2015, the Central Organization Department and the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security jointly issued a notice stipulating that female cadres receiving department-level benefits or women with senior professional titles must work until age 60 before retiring—a landmark adjustment to China's retirement age following the introduction of "delayed retirement" policies.

4.2.2. Learning from Domestic and International Policy Experiences

With socioeconomic development, people's life expectancy continues to increase while living costs keep rising. The pension expenditures funded by governments are increasingly insufficient to meet the needs of modern elderly populations, prompting governments worldwide to place greater emphasis on retirement policies. Globally, delaying the retirement age has gained widespread acceptance among governments. Many developed countries have implemented delayed retirement measures to address population aging and pension system challenges. In formulating its own delayed retirement policy, China has drawn extensively on international experience while making localized adjustments tailored to its national conditions.

4.3 Analysis of the Political Origins of the Delayed Retirement Policy

4.3.1. Government Strategic Planning and Decision-Making

In 2021, the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security issued the "14th Five-Year Plan for the Development of Human Resources and Social Security." The plan identifies multiple challenges facing China's human resources and social security sector during the 14th Five-Year period, with the deepening aging population posing a significant threat to the sustainability of the social security system. The phenomenon of "aging before prosperity" has become

increasingly prominent, with mounting financial pressures on pension insurance funds. This has sparked calls for delaying the retirement age and standardizing retirement ages for male and female employees. Given its possession of China's most critical demographic data and in response to accelerating population aging, the government has strategically proposed delaying retirement ages after careful consideration. Consequently, in September 2024, the policy was officially incorporated into the national development strategy as a key measure to address population aging and promote sustainable socioeconomic development.

4.3.2. Public Opinion and Interest Groups

The delayed retirement policy concerns the vital interests of a vast number of workers, and public opinion exerts a significant influence on its formulation and implementation. On one hand, some citizens express concerns about delayed retirement, fearing it may affect their employment and quality of life; on the other hand, many recognize the increasing pressure on the social security system, understand the necessity of delayed retirement, and support the policy. In formulating the policy, the government must fully consider public opinion and citizen demands, and strive to build social consensus through enhanced publicity and guidance as well as improved supporting measures.

Furthermore, during the formulation of the delayed retirement policy, there is a strategic interaction among various interest groups. For instance, enterprises may worry that delayed retirement will increase labor costs, while workers focus on the protection of their rights and interests. The government promotes the steady implementation of the policy by balancing the interests of all parties.

5. The Convergence of Multiple Sources of the Delayed Retirement Policy and the Opening of the Policy Window

5.1 Structural Contradictions in Population and Labor Forces Have Compelled Reforms into a New Era

Based on Jindeng's multi-source theory, the formulation and implementation of public policies are not driven by a single factor, but rather result from the convergence and coupled interaction of three major sources: problem origins, policy origins, and political origins.

When these three sources achieve deep integration, the policy window opens accordingly, facilitating the transition of policies from discussion and deliberation to formal implementation. As a core measure in China's social security system and labor employment reform, the evolution of the delayed retirement policy closely aligns with the operational logic of the multi-source theory, representing the outcome of long-term accumulation and integration of multiple social realities, academic research, and political decision-making factors.

From the perspective of policy evolution, China's exploration of a delayed retirement policy has been underway for some time. Over the years, relevant authorities have consistently sent policy signals to the public, conducted public opinion surveys and stakeholder consultations, and held multiple rounds of discussions on issues such as the feasibility, implementation pathways, and applicable scenarios for adjusting the retirement age. However, constrained by various factors-including a stable demographic structure, ample labor resources, inconsistent societal perceptions, and significant challenges in interest coordination-the policy remained largely confined to theoretical discussions and social deliberation, failing to develop formal implementation plans or institutional frameworks, resulting in a relatively slow pace of policy advancement.

Since the dawn of the new era, China's demographic and socio-economic landscape has undergone profound transformations. The issue of delayed retirement has gained sustained momentum as a central driver for policy reform. On one hand, China's population aging process continues to accelerate: the elderly population is growing steadily while life expectancy has significantly increased, creating a severe disconnect between traditional retirement age standards and current demographic patterns. This has intensified pressure on pension fund balance and posed significant challenges to the sustainability of the elderly care system. On the other hand, the labor market structure has fundamentally shifted-the working-age population declines annually, the demographic dividend diminishes, and certain industries face labor shortages and talent gaps. Meanwhile, average years of education have risen markedly, along with improved professional skills and longer work experience. The existing statutory

retirement age no longer meets modern labor market demands, hindering optimal utilization of workforce resources. In this context, delaying retirement has evolved from a theoretical concept into an urgent practical necessity for addressing demographic challenges, strengthening pension security, and optimizing labor resource allocation. It has now become a key government priority and a public concern requiring systematic resolution as a critical policy issue.

5.2 Academic Research and Practical Experience Lay the Foundation for Policy Development

While the root causes of the issue continue to emerge, the policy framework for delayed retirement has been steadily developed and refined, providing robust theoretical foundations and practical solutions for its implementation. Over the years, scholars in sociology, economics, and social security studies have conducted extensive systematic research on this policy, focusing on key aspects such as gradual adjustments to retirement ages, tailored approaches for different demographic groups, integration of pension systems with social security networks, and protection of employment rights. This research has yielded substantial academic findings, policy analysis reports, and actionable implementation strategies. Meanwhile, most countries worldwide have already completed reforms to their delayed retirement systems, accumulating mature practices in flexible retirement mechanisms, phased implementation approaches, support policies for vulnerable groups, and public communication strategies-providing valuable references for China's policymaking. Additionally, pilot initiatives, policy simulations, and feedback from various stakeholders across regions and industries have further refined policy details, mitigated potential implementation risks, and established a comprehensive, actionable policy toolkit. These efforts have laid solid theoretical and practical foundations for the scientific formulation and precise execution of delayed retirement policies.

5.3 Academic Research and Practical Experience Lay the Foundation for Policy Development

With the maturation of both problem-root causes and policy frameworks, sustained efforts from

political initiatives ultimately led to the formal implementation of the delayed retirement reform. Grounded in national long-term development strategies, the government integrated this reform into comprehensive plans for population management and social security system modernization, proactively addressing new challenges and demands arising from demographic changes within the context of high-quality economic and social development. Concurrently, as public understanding deepened, awareness of issues such as population aging, labor shortages, and sustainable elderly care grew significantly. Public discourse shifted from initial controversy to rational acceptance, with most citizens recognizing the necessity and long-term value of the reform, thereby fostering a favorable social environment for its implementation. Government authorities at all levels and relevant departments have consistently coordinated interests among enterprises, workers, and elderly care institutions, balanced disparities across industries and age groups, gradually overcome institutional barriers, and consolidated societal consensus and collaborative governance momentum for the policy reform.

In summary, the increasingly prominent structural issues in population and employment constitute a clear source of challenges; mature academic research, domestic and international practical experience, and pilot outcomes form a solid policy foundation; while national strategic planning, consensus among public opinion, and coordinated governance establish a stable political foundation. These three sources have evolved from being isolated and separate to deeply intersecting and synergizing, thereby fully opening the policy window for delayed retirement and propelling its transition from long-term deliberation and theoretical discussion to formal implementation and comprehensive advancement, making it a significant landmark initiative for China's livelihood security and population system reform in the new era.

6. Conclusion and Discussion

This paper employs a multi-source flow analysis model to examine the delayed retirement policy, demonstrating that its implementation results from the interplay of multiple factors. The problem sources-including population aging and changes in labor market structure-interact with policy sources such as expert research and

international best practices, alongside political sources like government strategic planning and public opinion, all converging under specific policy conditions to propel the policy onto the agenda and into practice. At the problem source level, pressing issues-including deepening population aging, rising life expectancy, and declining working-age populations-have become increasingly evident, making traditional retirement systems inadequate for contemporary societal needs. Regarding policy sources, domestic scholars have conducted extensive research on institutional design and implementation pathways while drawing on reform experiences from other countries and developing tailored solutions through localized pilot programs. Politically, the government has incorporated this reform into long-term development plans, actively engaging with public feedback and guiding social discourse.

The three major policy streams have achieved deep integration at critical junctures, driving the formal inclusion of delayed retirement into the public policy agenda and its gradual implementation. As this initiative concerns the vital interests of hundreds of millions of people, it represents a complex systemic project that faces numerous practical challenges during execution. It may not only impact the labor market but also impose higher demands on protecting workers' rights and ensuring equitable job distribution. To address these issues, the government must continuously provide clear policy explanations and effective communication to alleviate public concerns. Additionally, it should steadily enhance supporting mechanisms, accommodate the diverse needs of different professions and age groups, and dynamically refine policy details. Through coordinated efforts from all stakeholders, the policy can be implemented smoothly and systematically, fully leveraging its institutional effectiveness to support long-term stable economic and social development.

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