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# Framing Policy Reform in Europe. A Comparative Study of Frame Variation Across Countries, Newspapers, and Time

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## ABSTRACT

Politicians must navigate the complexities of social policy reform to ensure sustainable fiscal policies while considering their impact on citizens. News media play a crucial role as a source of political information, influencing public attitudes towards policy changes through selective framing of issues. This study focuses on how European news media frame the controversial policy reform of raising the retirement age, and explores factors that potentially explain variations in framing across contexts. Using a manual content analysis of newspapers in Denmark, Spain, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom over the period 2011–2020 ( $n = 1059$  articles), we examine country-, newspaper-, and time-related factors to explain the relative presence of issue-specific diagnostic and prognostic frames in European news coverage of pension reform. While the results show that all three types of factors determine the coverage of the reform measure to some extent, in particular variations across newspapers and over time are prevalent. The most striking differences are that left-leaning newspapers emphasize frames related to inequality, and that over time, framing crystallizes into a more concentrated set of diagnostic and prognostic frames. This article sheds light on European news coverage of a much-debated policy issue and its contextual dependency.


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In the face of demographic and economic developments, politicians are constantly discussing and adopting social policy reforms to maintain sustainable national fiscal policies. Most of these reforms pose a dilemma: while they are necessary to maintain the economic balance of public finances, they might have negative consequences for the financial situation of certain groups of individuals. This puts politicians in the position of balancing the risk of electoral punishment for passing unpopular reforms with the risk of electoral punishment for not implementing necessary measures to ensure financial sustainability (Lee et al. 2020; Schumacher, Vis, and Van Kersbergen 2013).

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As a key source of political information and diverse perspectives, news media play a crucial role in helping citizens understand social and political issues (Boydston 2013; Eveland and Schmitt 2015). Therefore, the framing of issues under consideration for policy reform in news media coverage has important implications. Media's emphasis on certain aspects of an issue at the expense of others can promote particular interpretations of an issue that have a potentially significant impact on people's attitudes towards the issue, ultimately yielding electoral punishment or rewards for passing reforms (Chong and Druckman 2007; Entman 1993; Vliegenthart 2012a).

News framing is inherently a dynamic process that can vary over time and across contexts. Understanding variations in framing in journalistic content is therefore key to understanding how perceptions of fundamental policy issues are constructed and how they change in different societal contexts. This, in turn, is a crucial component in understanding the potential (or lack thereof) for policy reform and the strategies politicians use when trying to push through such reforms.

An important and high-profile issue that has received considerable media coverage across Europe in recent years is pension reform (OECD 2013). One of the most visible and far-reaching reform measures has been the increase in the retirement age. Such a change to extend working lives is crucial to maintaining the adequacy and affordability of pensions, the main concerns underlying the need for pension reforms. At the same time, however, it is a controversial measure with negative consequences for a large proportion of citizens (OECD 2019). It thus embodies the dilemma between financial sustainability and individual consequences that characterizes many social policy reforms. The controversial nature of this issue makes it a valuable case study to examine how journalists present the issue in the news, as this is likely to affect the public's knowledge of the policy measure and potential support or opposition to it, which may ultimately affect politicians' leverage to pass reforms.

Although many European countries are dealing with pension reforms, and specifically with raising the retirement age, there are considerable differences between countries regarding the institutional characteristics of pension systems, political systems, and media systems. The purpose of this study is twofold: First, to gain insights into how European news media frame this fiercely debated policy issue, and second, to contribute to the understanding of variation in framing of policy issues across countries, newspapers, and time (for a similar approach, see Snow, Vliegenthart, and Corrigan-Brown 2007; Vliegenthart et al. 2010).

To achieve these objectives, we conduct a manual content analysis of eight quality newspapers in four European countries that differ considerably in terms of their pension, political, and media systems (i.e., Denmark, Spain, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom). Our main interest lies in mapping the variation in media framing of social policy reform and thus understand how context characteristics translate into different journalistic content. By taking this cross-national comparative perspective, covering a ten-year period (2011–2020), we contribute to the general understanding of differences in media framing of the same policy issue and address the nature and magnitude of variation that can be attributed to country-, newspaper-, and time-related sources. While these factors have been considered in previous research (e.g., Snow, Vliegenthart, and Corrigan-Brown 2007; Vliegenthart et al. 2010), these studies have focused on highly salient and mediatized events such as elections or riots, covering shorter periods in

time. Here, we explore whether similar patterns and logics apply for a less salient, more “technical” issue.

## News Framing

Frames are one of the most important features of a news story (McLeod and Detenber 1999). When framing an issue, a particular definition of an issue is presented by selecting and emphasizing certain aspects of reality at the expense of others (De Vreese 2005; Entman 1993). For news coverage, this means that journalists emphasize certain elements when presenting (policy) issues and downplay or ignore others. In this way, news reports carry a particular definition and interpretation of an issue through their framing. In the literature, this type of framing is referred to as emphasis framing, which differs from equivalence framing, in which logically identical information is presented in different ways (Cacciatore, Scheufele, and Iyengar 2016).

Thus, by highlighting certain elements and perspectives of an issue at the expense of others, news frames serve as important signals to audiences about how to structure their thinking about an issue and can influence individual attitudes towards the issue (e.g., Chong and Druckman 2007; Lecheler and de Vreese 2019). Even recognizing that these framing effects are moderated to some extent by individual predispositions, news framing of issues has important implications for the leverage politicians have to pursue different policies on an issue.

News stories generally fit into generic structures, so-called generic frames, which are the result of journalistic routines and show conceptual overlap with news values used in the gatekeeping process (Brüggemann 2014). Researchers have uncovered several generic frames that are employed in the presentation of issues in the news, such as conflict frames, economic consequences frames, and human interest frames (see Valkenburg and Semetko 2000). Generic frames have also been identified for policy issues, consisting of, for example, economic frames, fairness and equality frames, and political frames (see Boydston et al. 2014).

In contrast to these generic frames are issue-specific frames, which are more concrete, issue-based structures that have the advantage of providing a rich and deep understanding of an issue (Brüggemann 2014; De Vreese 2005; Vliegthart 2012a). To capture the best of both worlds, this study relies on issue-specific frames that are nested within generic frames (see Brüggemann 2014). To give an example, in this study we uncovered that one of the important news frames focuses on citizens in difficulties, highlighting the negative impact on people’s lives due to the increase in the retirement age. We can consider this issue-specific frame as an explication of the generic human interest frame (Valkenburg and Semetko 2000; for more information, see the Methods section). This approach allows us to capture (general) variation in news coverage across countries, newspapers, and over time without losing sight of important and specific aspects of the pension reform issue.

An important aspect of the issue-specific framing approach is that frames define problems and propose solutions, which also stems from Entman’s classic definition (Brüggemann 2014; Entman 1993). Snow and Benford (1988) recognized these two core elements of framing in their diagnostic and prognostic framing approach. Diagnostic framing involves the definition of a problem, including the designation of a responsible party

and a victim or problem holder. Prognostic framing, on the other hand, is concerned with a solution, along with the actor responsible for providing this solution (Iyengar 1991; Snow and Benford 1988). This problem- and solution-oriented framing approach is well suited to issues of redistribution in general, including the issue of raising the retirement age, where problems and solutions can be viewed from multiple perspectives. It has proven useful in previous research on this topic (Van den Heijkant et al. 2023) and in other contexts (see, e.g., Damstra and Vliegthart 2018; Kroon et al. 2017; Roggeband and Vliegthart 2007; Snow, Vliegthart, and Corrigan-Brown 2007).

## Sources of Variation in News Framing of Raising the Retirement Age

### *Cross-National Variation in News Framing*

Although the topic of pension reform is socially and politically relevant across Europe, the way journalists report on it may vary across countries due to different levels of political parallelism and professionalization of journalism, as well as the structure of the media market and the role of the state in the media system. These aspects are underlying Hallin and Mancini's (2004) typology of media systems. Their pioneering work identifies types of media systems based on different historical developments and the resulting balance and connection between media and politics (Vliegthart et al. 2010). They distinguish between the *liberal model*, with its commercial media and market mechanisms as its most salient features; the *democratic corporatist model*, usually characterized by a strong professionalization of journalism; and the *polarized pluralist model*, characterized by a high degree of political parallelism and weaker professionalization than in the other systems (Brüggemann et al. 2014; Hallin and Mancini 2004; Strömbäck and Shehata 2007).

Journalistic standards and news production practices are reflecting these typical characteristics of the media system in which they are situated, leading to differences in how journalists from different countries and media models cover the same political issue (Strömbäck and Shehata 2007). In particular, the commercialized nature of newspapers stands out as a defining feature in countries that belong to the liberal model, such as the UK. In such countries, newspapers are relatively more dependent on revenue from sales and advertising (Vliegthart et al. 2010). This media environment fosters a competitive market with minimal state intervention, which shapes news content according to audience interests (Umbricht and Esser 2016). Due to the demonstrated appeal of human-interest framing, as it attracts readers and increases circulation and revenue (Figenschou, Thorbjørnsrud, and Hallin 2023; Skovsgaard and Hopmann 2020), journalists in liberal media systems may prioritize human interest stories. This is consistent with research showing that common people narratives are more prevalent in media systems with higher levels of commercialization (Umbricht and Esser 2016).

Therefore, in media systems with higher levels of commercialization, human-interest narratives are likely to be used extensively (Umbricht and Esser 2016), especially when covering controversial issues such as pension reform that may negatively affect certain groups in society (Van Solinge and Henkens 2017). As a result, we expect that countries that adhere to the liberal media system, such as the UK, will prominently adopt issue-specific frames that follow a generic human-interest structure. This leads to the following hypothesis:

H1a. In countries with high commercialization in journalism (the United Kingdom), human interest-oriented issue-specific frames will be more visible in news coverage on the increase in the retirement age than in countries with lower commercialization (Spain, Denmark, and the Netherlands).

Another aspect that varies between countries is the level of professionalism in journalism, which has a significant impact on the choice of frames used in reporting. Journalistic professionalism encompasses several key elements, including professional autonomy, adherence to professional norms such as ethical principles, and a commitment to serving the public interest (Brüggemann et al. 2014). This commitment to the public has been stated as the obligation to provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001), and includes a responsibility to inform audiences, present diverse perspectives on issues, and promote constructive public deliberation (Møller 2022). As a result, in countries where journalism is highly professionalized, coverage of issues such as raising the retirement age would likely be more substantial, delving deeper into the issue, offering critical analyses and considering its broader societal context. In such cases, journalists would be expected to use contextual and substantive frames that discuss the economic consequences and put emphasis on the question of who is responsible for coping with the consequences of the policy reform to adequately inform their audiences, leading to the following hypothesis:

H1b. In countries with high professionalization in journalism (the United Kingdom, Denmark, and the Netherlands), economic consequences and responsibility-oriented issue-specific frames will be more visible in news coverage on the increase in the retirement age than in countries with lower professionalization (Spain).

In addition to differences between countries resulting from different media systems, the general political environment also plays an important role in shaping the use of specific frames in news coverage. A generic frame commonly used by news outlets is conflict framing, which is particularly prevalent when political conflicts are central to the narrative. We contend that the use of conflict framing might be issue specific, but that the political context might well influence the general presence of this framing in news coverage. We argue that the level of political conflict in a country influences the adoption of conflict framing in news coverage. Here, we distinguish between majoritarian and consensual democracies. On the one hand, in majoritarian democracies, there is a clear distinction between government and the opposition, resulting in more structured political conflict (Gallagher and Mitchell 2005). On the other hand, in consensus democracies, multiple parties work together in the government, and opposition parties often take a constructive approach.

Given these differences, we expect conflict framing to be more prevalent in coverage from majoritarian countries (such as the UK and Spain, the latter having a system of proportional representation, yet with majoritarian outcomes, see Gallagher and Mitchell 2005). This difference in the presence of conflict is found in an earlier study on political news coverage in the UK (majoritarian) and the Netherlands (consensus democracy), where conflict was more prevalent in British newspapers compared to Dutch ones (Vliegenthart, Boomgaarden, and Boumans 2011). Thus, we formulate the following hypothesis:

H1c. In majoritarian countries (the United Kingdom and Spain), political conflict-oriented issue-specific frames will be more visible in news coverage on the increase in the retirement age than in countries with a consensus democracy (Denmark and the Netherlands).

### ***Newspaper Variation in News Framing***

We now turn to newspaper variation in news framing on the issue of raising the retirement age. The norm of objectivity has emerged as a powerful professional ideal among journalists, especially as the news media distanced themselves from strong institutional and organizational ties to political parties during the party press era (e.g., Donsbach and Klett 1993; Schudson 2001). This norm plays a central role in the legitimacy claims of independent news media, as it emphasizes the avoidance of ideological slant in their news coverage (Kaplan 2006; McNair 1998). Particularly when covering political “hard news” issues, such as raising the retirement age, journalists are professionally inclined to maintain objectivity and avoid ideological bias (Skovsgaard 2013).

Yet, despite their efforts to break ties with specific political parties, many mainstream media in European countries have retained a political leaning (or orientation) that stems from the era of the party press. While they aim to exclude ideological values from news coverage, these values often find expression in editorials and opinion pages.

However, numerous studies conducted in different countries have shown the existence of a spillover effect from editorial endorsements to news coverage, leading to an ideological slant in the news (e.g., Brandenburg 2006; Jandura and Großmann 2003; Kahn and Kenney 2002). Furthermore, research has highlighted an ideological bias in the agenda-setting effects of political parties, with news media more likely to focus on stories and issues that align with the ideologies of the supporting politicians (e.g., Haselmayer, Wagner, and Meyer 2017; Van der Pas, Van der Brug, and Vliegthart 2017). These findings suggest that despite reduced organizational ties between news media and political parties, media systems still exhibit political parallelism, with news content following ideological lines, albeit to a limited extent.

If we extend this logic to news framing, which—like story selection—is the result of decisions made during the news reporting process, it is reasonable to expect that the framing of news about the rising retirement age would, to some extent, align with the ideological leanings of newspapers (e.g., Kim, Carvalho, and Davis 2010). Typically, (center-)left politicians advocate for equal distribution of wealth and stand up for deserving individuals, while (center-)right politicians emphasize the economic consequences and individual responsibility. Consequently, we expect left-leaning newspapers to emphasize problems and solutions related to raising the retirement age from a generic human-interest angle. On the other hand, right-leaning newspapers are likely to emphasize financial sustainability and individual responsibility in their coverage of the pension reform (see, e.g., Jæger 2006; Parlevliet 2017). Based on the above considerations, we have formulated the following hypotheses:

H2a. For left-leaning newspapers, human interest-oriented issue-specific frames will be more visible in news coverage on the increase in the retirement age than for right-leaning newspapers.



H2b. For right-leaning newspapers, economic consequences and responsibility-oriented issue-specific frames will be more visible in news coverage on the increase in the retirement age than for left-leaning newspapers.

The size of these differences between left- and right-leaning newspapers is likely to be determined by the degree of political parallelism and professionalization of journalism in the different countries. High political parallelism, on the one hand, indicates stronger connections between certain outlets and parties and a higher likelihood of content alignment along ideological lines (Hallin and Mancini 2004; Seymour-Ure 1974). On the other hand, high professionalization with an emphasis on the norm of objectivity and the separation of opinion and reporting is likely to reduce the ideological slant in the coverage of political issues (e.g., Hopmann, Van Aelst, and Legnante 2012).

Spain belongs to the polarized pluralist model, which is characterized by high political parallelism and less professionalization than other systems. While the democratization process after Franco's death in 1975 led to the formal independence of newspapers, newspapers and journalists tend to have a clear ideological orientation and are thus divided along ideological lines. The professionalization of journalism is also relatively low, and political reporters in Spain score significantly higher on the impartial-partisan continuum and experience significantly higher political pressure on their autonomy than their colleagues in Denmark and the UK (the Netherlands was not included in the study) (Van Dalen 2012). This partisanship is reflected in content: Newspapers cover politicians who are ideologically aligned with them in more favorable terms than other politicians (Van Dalen, De Vreese, and Albæk 2012).

Denmark and the Netherlands both belong to the democratic corporatist model. In the first part of the twentieth century, both countries were characterized by a strong party press and, in the Netherlands, by a division along religious lines (so-called pillarization). This led to a high degree of political parallelism. However, while most newspapers have retained a political orientation and moderate political segmentation among their audiences, political parallelism has declined rapidly, and news media operate independently of political parties. At the same time, journalism in both countries has become highly professionalized with a commitment to independence, autonomy, and objectivity (Skovsgaard et al. 2013; Vliegenthart 2012b). Compared to political reporters in Spain and the UK, Danish political reporters reported significantly lower partisanship on the impartial-partisan scale (Van Dalen 2012).

British political reporters scored between Spain and Denmark on partisanship, reflecting the relatively high political parallelism, i.e., partisanship, of British newspapers (e.g., Curtice 1997; Norris 2011) and the lower level of journalistic professionalization compared to Danish and Dutch journalists (Brüggemann et al. 2014). However, Spain remains the country with the highest level of political parallelism and the lowest level of journalistic professionalization (Brüggemann et al. 2014). This leads us to expect that the differences between left- and right-leaning newspapers will be largest in Spain and smallest in Denmark and the Netherlands, which have the lowest levels of political parallelism and the highest levels of journalistic professionalization. For the UK, we expect the differences to be larger than in the Netherlands and Denmark, but smaller than in Spain.

H2c. In news coverage on the increase in retirement age, differences between left- and right-leaning newspapers in the use of issue-specific frames related to human interest on the one



hand and issue-specific frames related to economic consequences and responsibility on the other will be largest in polarized pluralist countries (Spain) and smallest in democratic corporatist countries (the Netherlands and Denmark).

### ***Over-Time Variation in News Framing***

In the realm of framing as an inherently dynamic process, an intriguing aspect is temporal variation (McCammon 2012), particularly in the use of diagnostic frames, which define problems, and prognostic frames, which propose solutions, and the relative prominence of both as news coverage of a given issue accumulates over time.

Previous research, focusing primarily on specific events or crises, demonstrates how structural features of news coverage change over time. Examining media coverage in the aftermath of the 2005 French riots, Snow, Vliegenthart, and Corrigan-Brown (2007) find that diagnostic framing becomes less varied over time. They label this process frame crystallization and argue that key actors reach a kind of consensus on the main problem at stake, while still differing on the solutions being discussed. Here we anticipate that diagnostic crystallization takes place, but – given the long time span we consider – also prognostic crystallization is likely. Consistent with this expectation, Van der Meer et al. (2014) suggest that as an organizational crisis evolves, the frames used by various stakeholders become more aligned, suggesting less frame variation over time. Applied to this study, we hypothesize the following:

H3a. Over time, less variation in both diagnostic and prognostic framing is present in news coverage on the increase in the retirement age (frame crystallization hypothesis).

Furthermore, we also anticipate substantial changes over time. While at the beginning of the research period, in the early 2010s, the focus is likely to be on defining and discussing the problems, over time more attention is likely to be devoted to potential solutions to the problem (for a similar argument, see Snow, Vliegenthart, and Corrigan-Brown 2007). Thus, our final hypothesis is:

H3b. Over time, the salience of diagnostic framing relative to prognostic framing decreases.

### **Method**

A systematic content analysis was conducted to examine the framing of the retirement age issue in European news media. We used newspaper data from four European countries, covering the years 2011–2020. This ten-year period includes different phases of the policy measure of raising the retirement age, allowing us to capture the development of this issue. These phases include the proposal of the policy measure, its actual implementation, and the aftermath in which further adjustments are considered or implemented. The four European countries in our sample are Denmark, Spain, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. The selected countries include different types of European pension systems and vary considerably in terms of political and media systems. Furthermore, in all countries pension reforms have been subject of political and societal debate during the period under study. For each country, we selected two quality newspapers based on two considerations: (1) we selected newspapers that are widely read in the respective country, and (2) we selected

**Table 1.** Sample Characteristics.

Country	Media system	Newspaper	Political leaning	No. of articles	No. of relevant articles
DK	Democratic Corporatist Model	Jyllands-Posten	Right	161	91
		Politiken	Left	114	70
ES	Polarized Pluralist Model	El Mundo	Right	178	120
		El Pais	Left	205	141
NL	Democratic Corporatist Model	NRC Handelsblad	Center-Right	161	133
		De Volkskrant	Center-Left	230	192
UK	Liberal Model	The Times	Right	265	149
		The Guardian	Left	240	163
<b>Total</b>				1,554	1,059

Note: Political leaning of newspapers based on Vliegenghart and Mena Montes (2014); Boumans, Boomgaarden, and Vliegenghart (2013); Van Dalen, De Vreese, and Albæk (2012).

one newspaper with a more left-leaning ideology and one newspaper with a more right-leaning ideology (see Table 1).

### Sample

Units of analysis were individual newspaper articles retrieved from the online databases NexisUni (Spain, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom) and Infomedia (Denmark). For NexisUni, we used a customized search term for each language consisting of the words pension or retirement, age, and increase (and all sorts of synonyms for it such as rise, postponement, higher, 67 years) that needed to occur within approximately the same sentence (i.e., less than ten words apart; see search strings in Appendix). To select only the most relevant articles, we restricted our search to the headline and lead sections. For Infomedia, the same search term was used, customized for the Danish language. In this database, we used an operator that included the headline, subhead, and first paragraph of the main text. Since this is a bit stricter than the lead sections in NexisUni, we have corrected this by adopting a looser rule whereby the keywords must occur within fifteen (rather than ten) words apart (see search string in Appendix). This search procedure resulted in a total sample of 1,554 newspaper articles from the four countries (see Table 1).

The sample was manually cleaned using two simple selection criteria. Newspaper articles explicitly needed to refer to (1) the pension reform of raising the retirement age and (2) the country of the respective newspaper. This manual step was included in the coding instrument and performed by the coders. Nearly 70 percent of the initial sample met these criteria, resulting in a final sample of 1,059 relevant newspaper articles (161 from Denmark, 261 from Spain, 325 from The Netherlands, and 312 from the United Kingdom).

### Coding Procedure and Reliability

The coding instrument used in this study builds on a previous content analysis on this topic in the Dutch context (Van den Heijkant et al. 2023). In this previous study, a qualitative pre-study was used to identify the frames used in the Dutch context, which formed the starting point for the current coding instrument. We further extended and adjusted our instrument by reading a random set of articles from the other included countries, asking ourselves the questions: (1) "What is seen as the problem?" and (2) "What should be done to solve the issue?". This procedure resulted in four diagnostic and

four prognostic frames for raising the retirement age, which were included in the coding instrument. The coding instrument consisted of a series of close-ended questions designed to measure a frame's presence, and multiple frames could be coded per unit of analysis. The complete codebook is available in [the supplemental material](#).

We trained six native (or fluent) speaking coders in the next phase of this systematic content analysis. This training consisted of several (online) sessions over the course of a month, composed of explaining the coding instrument, joint practice with newspaper articles from a newspaper that was not included in our sample (i.e., The Daily Mail), and multiple rounds of homework assignments, feedback, and discussion to achieve an adequate level of consensus on the elements in the coding instrument.

Intercoder reliability was measured on a set of 120 newspaper articles from the United Kingdom (i.e., The Guardian and The Times), as English was the language the coders had in common. We used a stratified sample to ensure that each year occurred in the set, just as in the full sample. We used standardized Lotus coefficients to calculate intercoder reliability, as this measure accounts for an agreement based on chance and is particularly suitable for dichotomous variables that are skewed or score low on "positives" (Aaldering and Vliegthart 2016). Standardized Lotus coefficients yielded satisfactory results for all frames, with most coefficients (well) above .67 and at least all coefficients above .60 (see Fretwurst 2015). Results are reported in [Table 2](#).

### ***Issue-Specific Frames of Raising the Retirement Age***

In terms of the problems addressed in the coverage of raising the retirement age, we distinguish four major diagnostic (or problem) frames. The first problem frame is the *Citizens in Difficulties* frame, which is evident in a newspaper article that highlights the difficulties faced by specific groups or individuals as a result of raising the retirement age. It focuses on what these citizens stand to lose and gives it a human or emotional face by emphasizing the personal challenges and negative impact on their lives. We argue that this frame is an explication of the generic human interest frame (Valkenburg and Semetko 2000). Also nested within the generic human interest frame (Valkenburg and Semetko 2000), a second issue-specific problem frame is the frame of *Inequality among Groups*. This frame draws attention to the problematic and unfair nature of raising the retirement age. It points out how this measure leads to inequalities and creates an unfair division between different groups, thereby exacerbating social and economic disparities. A third

**Table 2.** Intercoder Reliability Results ( $n = 720$ ).

	Standardized Lotus
Diagnostic frames	
Citizens in Difficulties	.63
Inequality among Groups	.74
Political Conflict	.73
Unsustainable Pension System	.69
Prognostic frames	
Individual Responsibility in Retirement	.80
Labor Market Improvement for Older Workers	.79
Policy Reform Improvement	.69
Policy Reform Alternative	.80

Note:  $n$  represents the number of codings on which the comparison is based.

problem frame is the *Political Conflict* frame. This frame focuses on the political negotiations, discussions, or struggles over the reform measure. By highlighting the competing interests and disagreements among policymakers and political parties regarding changes to the retirement age, this frame falls within the broader context of the generic conflict frame (Valkenburg and Semetko 2000). Finally, we identified the problem frame of *Unsustainable Pension System*. This frame comes into play when a newspaper article highlights the rising costs associated with pension systems or concerns about their long-term financial sustainability. By focusing on the financial challenges and affordability problems within the system, this frame can be nested within the generic economic consequences frame (Valkenburg and Semetko 2000).

In terms of prognostic (or solution) framing elements that deal with what needs to be done, we also identified four major frames. The first solution frame, labeled *Individual Responsibility in Retirement*, is present when emphasis is placed on the need for individuals to take charge of their retirement situation. It recognizes the challenges posed by the increasing retirement age and focuses on the solution of people proactively planning and preparing for their financial security in retirement. Because this frame assigns responsibility and capacity for its solution to individuals, we argue that this frame is an explication of the generic responsibility frame (Valkenburg and Semetko 2000). The following three issue-specific frames are less easily nested within one of the generic frames. The solution frame of *Labor Market Improvement for Older Workers* emphasizes the need to improve the working conditions and employability of older workers, or the need for a modern labor market, as a solution that enables individuals to prolong their working lives. Another prognostic frame is labeled as *Policy Reform Improvement*. This frame is present when a newspaper article emphasizes a suggestion for improving the existing policy reform of raising the retirement age to achieve better outcomes. Finally, we identified the *Policy Reform Alternative* frame. This frame is present when a newspaper article emphasizes the need for an alternative policy measure as a substitute for raising the retirement age.

## **Analysis**

To assess the varying presence of both problem and solution frames in coverage, we relied on analyses on the article level. We included the following independent variables:

### **Country**

We included dummies for each of the countries in our sample, with Denmark as the reference category.

### **Leaning newspaper**

A dummy variable captures whether the newspaper in which the article was published is (center-)left-leaning or (center-)right-leaning.

### **Time**

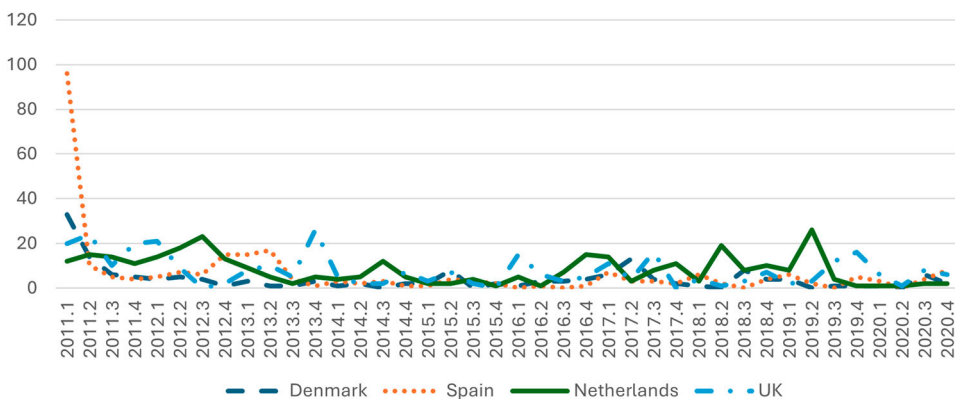
To account for over-time trends, we included a count variable that captures, at a quarterly level, the time period in which the article was published. The first quarter of the covered research period is assigned a value of 1, the second quarter a value of 2, and so forth.

We conducted a series of logistic regressions, predicting the presence of each frame in an article based on the frames outlined above. To assess over-time developments in framing and shifts from more diagnostic to more prognostic framing, as well as frame crystallization, we must move the analysis away from the article level as they consider broader characteristics of the overall news supply. We aggregate the data per outlet to a quarterly level – this aggregation level allows for a sufficient number of articles in most time periods while remaining relatively fine-grained and thus being able to pick up over-time changes in somewhat detail. We included the same independent variables as for the article-level analyses. Various dependent variables were constructed. First, we constructed a variable that captures the share of diagnostic frames from the total frames. Here, we divided per outlet/quarter the total number of present diagnostic frames by the total number of frames (both diagnostic and prognostic). Additionally, we constructed two variables to capture frame crystallization, both for diagnostic and prognostic framing. We relied on the Herfindahl Index, which is often used in economics to measure market concentration. The maximum score of 1 represents a complete concentration on a single frame in the news, while a Herfindahl Index approaching zero indicates a greater diversity of frames. We used the share of each frame per quarter/outlet combination to calculate the Herfindahl Index for both media types. Higher scores indicate more crystallization. We relied on OLS models to test our expectations regarding structural, over-time developments.

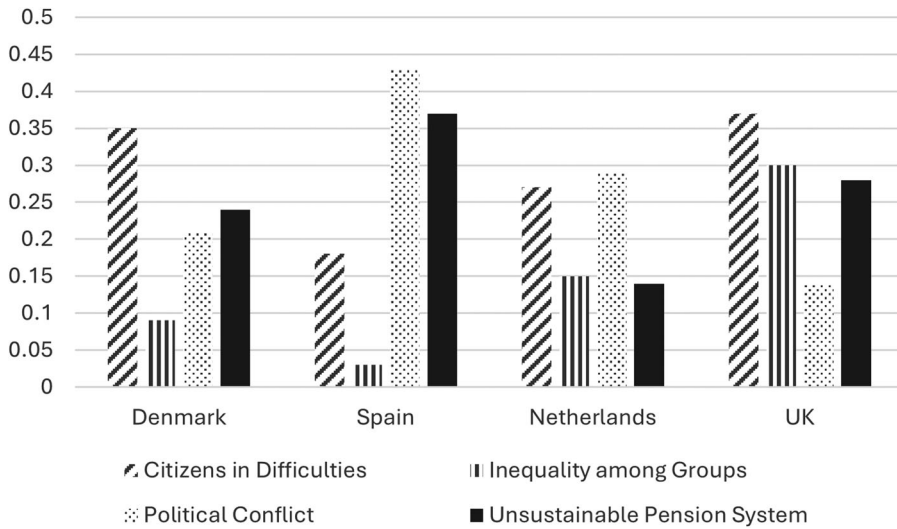
## Results

Before testing our hypotheses, we present several descriptive findings. [Figure 1](#) presents the attention to the issue over time. It shows that the issue is on the agenda in all four countries throughout the research period, but with peaks in the early years, when, particularly in Spain, a discussion about raising the retirement age from 65 to 67 is highly visible in the media.

[Figure 2](#) shows the cross-national variation in diagnostic frames across countries by looking at the share of articles in which each frame is present. All frames are present in all countries, but there are considerable differences. The most notable differences



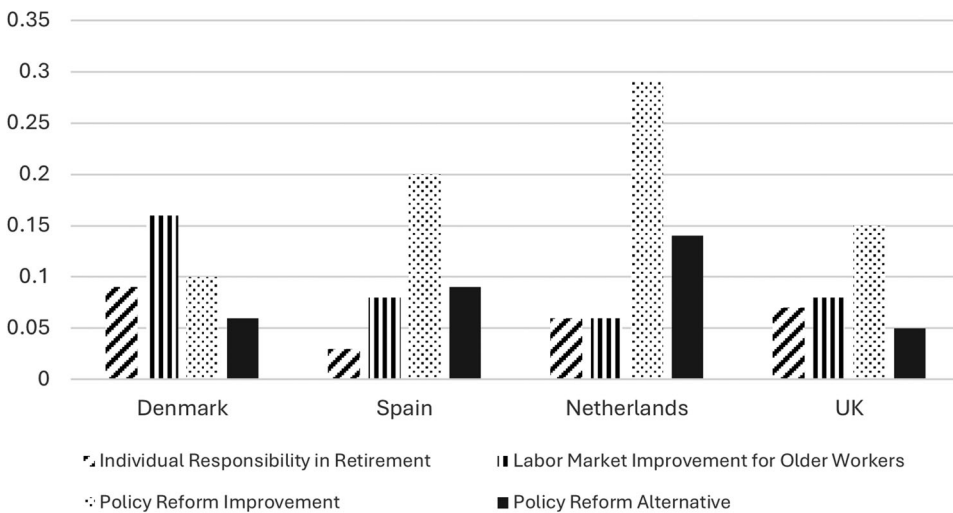
**Figure 1.** Number of Articles per Quarter.



**Figure 2.** Presence of Diagnostic Frames.

include the large presence of the *Inequality among Groups* frame in the UK compared to the other countries, especially Spain. In Spain, the *Political Conflict* frame, and, to a lesser extent, the *Unsustainable Pension System* frame are most prevalent. The Netherlands and Denmark have the most diverse framing, with all four frames clearly present.

Figure 3 provides the same information for prognostic frames. We can see that the prognostic frames are less prevalent in news coverage than the diagnostic frames, but again we see considerable variation across countries. In the Netherlands, for example, both the *Policy Reform Improvement* and *Alternative* frames are widely discussed. *Policy Reform Improvement* is also the most common solution frame in Spain and the UK,



**Figure 3.** Presence of Prognostic Frames.

while Denmark is the only country where most attention is paid to the frame of *Labor Market Improvement for Older Workers* as a solution to the aging of the workforce.

### Cross-National Variation

Next, we test the hypotheses regarding cross-national differences. H1a predicted that in countries with high commercialization (the United Kingdom), human interest-oriented issue-specific frames would be more visible in news coverage on the increase in the retirement age than in countries with lower commercialization (Spain, Denmark, and the Netherlands). As shown in Table 3, for the *Citizens in Difficulties* frame, our analysis shows that it is most present in the UK and Denmark and least present in Spain. For the other human interest-related frame, *Inequality among Groups*, the UK stands out, with the odds of an article containing such a frame being almost four times higher than in Denmark. There is no statistically significant difference between Denmark and the Netherlands while Spain shows significantly lower levels of the *Inequality among Groups* frame in news coverage on the retirement age issue than the other three countries. Thus, the results of the analysis largely support the expectations in H1a. The country with the most commercialized media system (the UK) shows the highest level of human interest-related frames while the country with the least commercialized media system (Spain) shows the lowest levels of these frames.

H1b predicted that in countries with high professionalization in journalism, substantive issue-specific frames will be more visible in news coverage on the increase in the retirement age than in countries with weaker professionalization. This means that we anticipate the *Individual Responsibility in Retirement* and *Unsustainable Pension System* frames to be more visible in Denmark, The Netherlands, and the UK compared to Spain. We confirm this hypothesis for the *Individual Responsibility in Retirement* frame, with Spain showing a significantly lower odds ratio than the other countries (see Table 4). For the *Unsustainable Pension System* frame, we find the opposite results – it is most frequently used in Spain (Table 3), potentially due to the economic conditions in that country, making the financing of the pension system an urgent issue.

H1c suggests that issue-specific frames related to political conflict are more present in news coverage on the retirement age increase in majoritarian countries compared to countries with a consensus democracy, that is, in the UK and Spain compared to Denmark and the Netherlands. We have to reject this hypothesis. The *Political Conflict* frame is indeed most prevalent in Spain, but this is not the case for the UK. Rather, the *Political Conflict* frame is slightly more prevalent in the Netherlands than in Denmark and the UK (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** Predicting Problem Frames.

	Citizens in Difficulties	Inequality among Groups	Political Conflict	Unsustainable Pension System
<i>Country</i> <sup>1</sup>				
Spain	.389*** (.237)	.310* (.454)	2.552*** (.234)	1.979** (.228)
Netherlands	.553** (.214)	1.469 (.317)	1.627* (.233)	.507** (.247)
UK	.980 (.207)	3.910*** (.302)	.655 (.254)	1.212 (.226)
Left newspaper	1.967*** (.145)	2.184*** (.189)	1.044 (.146)	1.023 (.146)
Quarter	1.025*** (.006)	1.023*** (.007)	.971*** (.006)	1.008 (.006)
Constant	.273*** (.206)	.047*** (.327)	.394*** (.220)	.269*** (.218)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.094	.179	.114	.064

Note: Reported are Odd Ratios from logistic regression models with standard errors in parentheses; \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ;  $N = 1,059$ ; <sup>1</sup>Denmark is reference category.



**Table 4.** Predicting Solution Frames.

	Individual Responsibility in Retirement	Labor Market Improvement for Older Workers	Policy Reform Improvement	Policy Reform Alternative
<i>Country</i> <sup>1</sup>				
Spain	.347* (.453)	.553 (.320)	2.325** (.309)	1.858 (.408)
Netherlands	.587 (.365)	.307*** (.323)	3.354*** (.293)	2.554* (.381)
UK	.716 (.353)	.415** (.309)	1.563 (.308)	.859 (.430)
Left newspaper	.805 (.262)	1.645* (.229)	1.364 (.161)	1.277 (.223)
Quarter	1.027** (.010)	1.043*** (.009)	1.019** (.006)	1.025** (.009)
Constant	.072*** (.351)	.070*** (.310)	.070*** (.299)	.035*** (.398)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.040	.078	.063	.057

Note: Reported are Odds Ratios from logistic regression models with standard errors in parentheses; \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ;  $N = 1,059$ ; <sup>1</sup>Denmark is reference category.

### Newspaper Variation

We formulated several hypotheses on the differences between newspapers. First, H2a predicted that left-leaning newspapers would use human interest-oriented issue-specific frames more often in their news coverage on the retirement age increase than right-leaning newspapers. Results clearly confirm this hypothesis: Table 3 reports an odds ratio of 2.184 – meaning that the odds of the *Inequality among Groups* frame's presence are twice as large in left-leaning newspapers compared to right-leaning newspapers. The same goes for the *Citizens in Difficulties* frame, where the odds ratio is 1.967.

H2b anticipated that frames related to individual responsibility and the economy would be more prevalent in news coverage of right-leaning newspapers than in that of left-leaning newspapers. In fact, the presence of the *Individual Responsibility in Retirement* frame and the *Unsustainable Pension System* frame (which can be considered an economic frame) does not differ significantly across left- and right-leaning newspapers (see Tables 3 and 4). Therefore, we have to reject this hypothesis.

The final newspaper-related hypothesis (H2c) assumed an interaction between newspaper leaning and political context, predicting that differences between left- and right-leaning newspapers in the use of frames related to inequality and negative implications for citizens on the one hand and frames related to individual responsibility and the economy on the other would be greatest in Spain and smallest in the Netherlands and Denmark. To test this, we interacted the left-leaning newspaper dummy with the country dummies, and these interaction terms were then added to the logistic regression models. The results reported in Table 5 show that our expectations are only to a limited extent confirmed. For one of the human interest frames, the *Citizens in Difficulties* frame, we do indeed find differences in line with the hypothesis with Spain having more pronounced differences between the left-leaning and right-leaning newspaper. For the other frames, this is not the case. Therefore, we reject this hypothesis.

### Over-Time Variation

Table 6 reports our findings regarding the differences over time. H3a predicted frame crystallization for both diagnostic and prognostic framing. This hypothesis is confirmed: for both problem and solution frames, we see an increase over time (quarterly), indicating a higher concentration on one or a limited number of frames and thus crystallization. H3b, which predicted that the salience of diagnostic framing relative to prognostic framing

**Table 5.** Testing Newspaper Differences across Countries.

	Citizens in Difficulties	Inequality among Groups	Unsustainable Pension System	Individual Responsibility in Retirement
<i>Country</i> <sup>1</sup>				
Spain	.167*** (.399)	.000 (3643.6)	1.891* (.307)	.164* (.797)
Netherlands	.420** (.310)	.562 (.483)	.544 (.339)	.628 (.495)
UK	.638 (.288)	2.360* (.389)	.886 (.310)	.876 (.453)
Left newspaper	.923 (.337)	.624 (.575)	.809 (.379)	.857 (.556)
Quarter	1.026*** (.006)	1.023** (.007)	1.009 (.006)	1.027** (.010)
Spain*left np	4.441** (.513)	1.64*e <sup>8</sup> (3643.6)	1.148 (.458)	3.296 (.998)
Netherlands*left np	1.919 (.431)	5.782* (.694)	.936 (.498)	.867 (.731)
UK*left np	2.475* (.417)	3.070 (.629)	1.872 (.458)	.616 (.722)
Constant	.380*** (.239)	.084*** (.361)	.295*** (.259)	.069*** (.402)
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	.106	.198	.069	.050

Note: Reported are Odd Ratios from logistic regression models with standard errors in parentheses; \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ;  $N = 1,059$ ; <sup>1</sup>Denmark is reference category.

**Table 6.** Predicting Framing Dynamics.

	Problem crystallization	Solution crystallization	Share problem framing
<i>Country</i> <sup>1</sup>			
Spain	.041 (.111)	.010 (.076)	.023 (.056)
Netherlands	-.202 (.106)	.008 (.072)	-.084 (.053)
UK	-.082 (.107)	-.043 (.073)	-.053 (.053)
Left newspaper	.086 (.075)	.067 (.051)	-.032 (.037)
Quarter	.009** (.003)	.009*** (.002)	-.004** (.002)
Constant	.389*** (.105)	.057 (.072)	.792*** (.052)
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.043	.060	.035

Note: Reported are unstandardized coefficients from OLS models with standard errors in parentheses; \*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .001$ ;  $N = 250$  (problem and solution crystallization) and 219 (share problem framing); <sup>1</sup>Denmark is reference category.

would decrease, is also confirmed: The share of diagnostic (problem) frames decreases over time, as indicated by the negative coefficient (–.004) for the quarter.

## Discussion

To keep pension systems financially sustainable, pension reforms have long been on the agenda of European policymakers and politicians. The issue of pension reform is characterized by its controversial nature and the associated negative consequences for citizens. News coverage of this issue can play a role in the knowledge that citizens gain about the reform measure, which in turn can impact the public support (or opposition) to such a measure. The aim of this study was therefore to examine how the raising of the retirement age is framed in the European news media and to account for the dynamics in these frames. We anticipated three sources of variation: country-related, newspaper-related, and time-related factors.

We first elaborate on how the issue of retirement age is framed in European newspapers. First, as one would expect with such an issue, diagnostic frames are more prevalent than prognostic frames across countries and different years. This finding aligns with previous research showing that journalists are more likely to highlight problems in their coverage of social issues than solutions (e.g., Kroon et al. 2017; Snow, Vliegthart, and Corrigan-

Brown 2007; Van den Heijkant et al. 2023), which probably stems from considerations of newsworthiness (i.e., negativity, drama) and commercial competition in the news market.

Regarding the differences between countries in the presence of the issue-specific frames, one notable difference is the high visibility of the *Inequality among Groups* frame in the UK compared to the other countries, especially Spain. Based on an additional question in the codebook that asked coders to indicate the groups to which the newspaper article referred to in terms of inequality, we are fairly certain that the high visibility of this frame stems from gender inequality in retirement age, which is a discussion that is specific to the UK context. This is also evident in, for instance, the Women Against State Pension Inequality (WASPI) movement that has been established in the UK (Van Solinge and Henkens 2017). In Spain, *Political Conflict* is the most dominant frame, closely followed by the *Unsustainable Pension System* frame, which perhaps tells us that the framing dialogue in Spain was more factual and centered on political or financial topics related to the retirement age increase. In the Netherlands and Denmark, the framing is the most diverse, with all four frames relatively evenly present. This may have something to do with the high salience of the issue in those countries throughout the period, as the more attention an issue receives, the more room there is for diverse interpretations (see Boydston 2013).

Our findings confirm many of the expectations regarding outlet and time differences and are consistent with previous research. The study thus demonstrates that the evolution of media coverage of issues follows predictable patterns and that these patterns do not depend on the character of the overall salience of the issue or event. For example, we find that left-leaning newspapers use more human interest-oriented frames related to inequality and negative implications for citizens (H2a), showing that news coverage of the retirement age increase is in line with the ideological leaning of the newspaper. This implies that citizens who read mainly left-leaning newspapers are more likely to be exposed to frames that emphasize the retirement age increase as unfair and problematic in terms of equality than people who read right-leaning newspapers. These differences between left- and right-leaning newspapers have important implications, as substantive differences can lead to (small) changes in how citizens view and respond to a particular issue, ultimately increasing the polarization of citizens' opinions. Another important finding is that framing crystallizes over time into a more concentrated set of diagnostic and prognostic frames (H3a), which may reflect the level of maturity of the policy measure. The fact that we considered such a long time period may well explain why we find this crystallization for prognostic frames, while previous studies (e.g., Snow, Vliegenthart, and Corrigan-Brown 2007) with a more limited time frame did not find such crystallization.

There are also clear differences across countries, but these are more difficult to attribute to straightforward explanatory variables. In most instances, the results are only partially in the anticipated direction. We find evidence for the expectation that the country with the most commercialized media system (the UK) has the highest level of human interest-related frames (H1a), but not, for example, for anticipated differences in conflict framing between majoritarian and consensus democracies (H1c). In addition, interactions between newspaper leaning and country characteristics are only to a limited extent in line with expectations (H2c). This indicates that many factors can affect coverage in a highly nuanced way, making it difficult to pinpoint the (combination

of) explanatory variables that can convincingly explain the cross-country variation. In our case, we also run into the problem of “too many variables, too few cases” – with only four countries and a range of explanatory factors at the context level. On a more general level, political and media system characteristics only account for variation in media content to a limited degree. More precise explanations, such as specific welfare state policies or the economic hardship experienced by citizens in certain countries (in our case Spain), which are not easily captured by a single variable, may be more suitable.

Future research should therefore include a wider range of countries, which would provide an opportunity to build and test a more elaborate framework for the impact of country context on media content. The fast developments in computational communication science and specifically supervised machine learning techniques (Eisele et al. 2023) may increase the opportunities to analyze a wider range of countries at relatively low cost. However, the complexity of the frames identified and the multilingual nature of comparative studies pose additional challenges for these types of analysis.

In addition, another source of variation deserves our attention: The actors that bring particular frames to the fore. These could be political actors (government versus opposition), but also employers, unions, citizens, financial parties, or special interest groups. These sources in the news deserve attention because their strategic use of frames may well account for a substantial share of the variation in media content.

Notwithstanding these avenues for future research, our study underscores the importance of a comparative approach when dealing with media coverage of contested issues such as the increase in the retirement age. At the very least, it shows that debates on this issue take place in different contexts and over longer periods of time, but that the content of these debates is far from similar. Quite the opposite, in fact, they are highly dependent on the broader context in which they take place.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Appendix

### Search Strings

#### Infomedia

**Denmark.** [allheadings, p1]:(pensionsalder OR pension OR efterløn\* OR tilbagetrækning OR tilbagetrækningsreform OR tilbagetrækningsalder OR pensionsreform OR arbejdskraft OR arbejdsudbud) NEAR/15 (øge OR forøge OR forlænge OR "arbejde længere" OR "62 år" OR "65 år" OR "66 år" OR "67 år" OR reform)

#### NexisUni

**Spain.** hlead(((jubilación w/10 edad) OR (retiro w/10 edad) OR (pensión w/10 edad)) w/10 subi! OR aument! OR increment! OR mejor! OR eleva! OR cambi! OR retras! OR postpon! OR posterg! OR prolong! OR laboral más larga OR prolong! la vida laboral OR 65 años or 66 años OR 67 años

**The Netherlands.** hlead(((AOW w/10 leeftijd) OR AOW-leeftijd OR (pensioen w/10 leeftijd) OR pensioenleeftijd) w/10 omhoog! OR verhog! OR verhoog! OR hoge! OR ophog! OR opgehoog! OR stijg! OR gestegen OR uitstel! OR uitgestel! OR verschuif! OR verschuiv! OR verschoven OR opschuif! OR opschuiv! OR opgeschoven OR toeneem! OR toenem! OR toenam! OR toegenomen OR oplop! OR opgelopen OR aanpass! OR aangepast! OR bijstel! OR bijgestel! OR langer werk! OR langer doorwerk! OR doorwerk! OR 65 jaar OR 66 jaar OR 67 jaar

**The United Kingdom.** hlead(((retirement w/10 age) OR (pension! w/10 age)) w/10 (increas! OR rais! OR rise OR rising OR postpon! OR shift! OR adjust! OR go! up OR creep! up OR higher! OR (work w/5 long!) OR prolong! working lives OR extend! working lives OR 65 years OR 66 years OR 67 years)