The 2015 WHCOA: Whither Old Age Policy 50 Years Later?


Ten years after the first edition of The New Politics of Old Age Policy and the fifth White House Conference on Aging (WHCOA); 50 years after the first WHCOA and the passage of Medicare, Medicaid, and the Older American’s Act; and 80 years after the birth of Social Security, the 2015 WHCOA is being implemented in small regional meetings with hopes for a modest national gathering. Compared to past conferences, Congress has not yet reauthorized the Older Americans Act, which determines conference processes; there is neither a statutory requirement nor framework for the conference, nor funding for delegates to attend a large national meeting; technology is the primary means to ensure access to meeting content; aging issues are not a priority for President Obama; expectations for significant change are tempered; and goals are modest. The scaled-back nature of the 2015 WHCOA contrasts markedly with the five prior WHCOAs that gave birth to major legislation. This contrast is to some extent symbolic of the cross-cutting themes of Hudson’s book; the politics of disensus as captured by Cook; the shift of older adults from disadvantaged, to advantaged, to contenders for limited resources, as articulated by Hudson and Gonyea; and the current framing of aging issues in terms of cost containment reflected by numerous authors. As Hudson notes in the introduction, the book’s chapters are about the politics, the populations, and the policies. To that list, I would add another “p,” i.e., the persistent and pervasive problems facing many older adults and their unpaid and underpaid caregivers, despite dramatic gains made in the past 80 years.

Similarly to previous editions (2010, 2005), the third edition examines the rapidly altered environment that shapes the evolving policies to address needs of older adults. However, there have been some profound changes since the 2nd edition. Many of these, which have altered the well-being and political capital of older adults, are captured by chapter authors. With 10,000 baby boomers turning age 65 each day since 2011, the recession created a growing number of boomers who could not afford to retire; reduced or in some instances eliminated pension income and housing assets; and increased disparities within the older population by race, ethnicity, gender, and class. Not since the Great Depression have there been such large income inequalities among the older population. At the same time, older adults are generally perceived as economically better off than younger adults, big business and technology have discovered the aging market, and models of healthy aging abound. Millennials are realizing that they may never attain the economic status enjoyed by their parents, and are questioning what policies—public or private—will benefit them as they age.

Hudson suggests that the policy of success as reflected in the overall improved economic status of older adults is now viewed by some as the policy of excess. Similarly, Cook and Moskowitz posit that we have moved from a politics of consensus to a politics of so-called disensus, or as Hudson argues, an expanding scope of conflict around aging policy over the past 35 years. These conflicts are reflected in increasing divergence over the role of public vs. private responsibility and discussion of previously taboo topics, such as means-testing of Social Security and Medicare. These demographic, social, and economic changes are occurring within the larger political context of intense bipartisanism, and the rise of a small-government conservative movement.

As in past editions, Hudson has assembled some of the greatest voices in the field—political science, sociology, law, social work, and gerontology—who draw upon the latest research and data sources, bring a critical and often deconstructionist stance, frame the issues in cogent insightful ways that sometimes challenge and upend common wisdom and long-held compassionate stereotypes, and cause us to rethink how we view aging-focused policy. The book starts with the theoretical, historical, and contextual, beginning with Hudson’s provocative summary of contemporary challenges to aging policy, in which he concludes that aging policy is “now facing something of a perfect storm” (p. 16). This is followed by an update of Wilmoth’s insightful discussion of structural lag to account for the poor fit between what many older people require, and policies in place to address their needs created by retirement, morbidity, disability, life expectancy, and how policy reforms to reduce structural lag may have unintended consequences for certain segments of the population (p. 33). A new data-rich chapter by Gist argues that the false merging of long-term fiscal effects of the...
aging of the population, combined with the short-term deficit created by the recession, prevents policy-makers from agreeing on solutions. He contends that although some reduction in entitlement spending is needed, revenues must be increased, limiting tax expenditures. Cook and Moskowitz’s concluding chapter on the Great Divide in Part I notes that whereas there is still overall public support (so-called politics of consensus) for Social Security, it is dividing along class lines, with some among the wealthiest thinking too much is being spent (so-called politics of dissent). Not surprisingly, Social Security is a priority topic for the regional WHCOAs, but increasingly framed within the context of personal responsibility for retirement.

In Part II, The Populations of Aging Policy, Gonyea and Hudson present a framework for the shifting political construction of older Americans as a target population of public policy: from their being seen as dependents (the passage of Social Security, Medicare, Medicaid, and the Older Americans Act, to emerging as advantaged by the 1970s (no longer marginalized but a robust well-established political presence), to current contenders, in which older adults must compete for benefits in ways unimaginable 30 years ago. Contenders are seen as threatening to others, facing loss of political legitimacy as others question their needs. Aging advocates are acutely concerned about the sustainability of age-based programs in the face of a growing split between well-off contenders and low-income dependents, many of whom are elders of color.

This framework of the shifting target population, which is central to many of the arguments in the book, is followed by insightful chapters on three specific population-based concerns: Rix on work and retirement, Midrazija and Angel on diversity and inequality, and Gonyea on the needs of the oldest old who are the most vulnerable. Absent from these population-based chapters, however, is a discussion of the distinctive policy needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) elders.

Part III, The Politics of Old Age Policies lays out three major aging-related policies: Campbell on the expanding scope of conflict related to Social Security, Morgan on competing visions of cost control of Medicare, and Applebaum and Bardo on the limitations of our nonsystem of long-term services and supports, and the failure of the CLASS Act. The concluding chapters address options and issues across multiple polices, and present two topics that challenge our conventional thinking: the means testing of social insurance programs—it is striking that this is being considered 80 years later—and a discussion of ageism in which older people are not just victims of age discrimination but also perpetrators. Hudson’s concluding chapter reiterates fundamental policy challenges, given increasing inequities within the aging population: old age is becoming an imperfect proxy for demonstrable need; “insofar as policy is concerned, who will be considered old in the coming years? (p. xiv).”

The 2015 WHCOA identified four priority areas: economic security, long-term services and supports, healthy aging, and elder justice. Hudson’s book focuses primarily on issues salient to economic security. With his past record of publication every five years, I hope that there will be a 4th edition in 2020. If so, greater attention should be given not only to the three other areas identified by the 2015 WHCOA, but also to the elder care workforce—both underpaid direct care staff and geriatric providers, and unpaid family caregivers. Similarly, in five years, more will be known about the policy changes brought about by the Affordable Care Act (ACA) and the effectiveness of innovations implemented through CMMI. Whereas the 3rd edition captures many major demographic and economic changes, the lives of those who are aging are increasingly being shaped by globalization, climate change, political unrest in every corner of the globe, instant communication, use of technology, and aging as big business. There will be even more complex “populations, policies, politics and problems” to consider in future editions. However, for now, The New Politics of Old Age Policy continues to be the most insightful and readable analysis of the state of U.S. public policy. It is a must-have for anyone who teaches about policy, seeks to influence policy, or wants to be well-informed of critical policy issues impacting older adults and their families.

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