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Navigating Eco-Social Policymaking: Trends, Drivers, and Barriers. Introduction to the Special Issue

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, research on the integration between social and ecological policies has significantly expanded, highlighting the multiple ways in which these two domains interact. Concepts such as "just transition" and "sustainable welfare" have gained prominence as normative frameworks capturing these interconnections. However, despite the increasing scholarly attention, several important theoretical, conceptual, and empirical gaps remain, particularly regarding how social and ecological spheres intersect across different political systems. This Special Issue contributes to this debate by exploring the complex policymaking dynamics underlying eco-social policies. Before presenting the contributions, this introductory article provides a thorough review of existing studies on eco-social policies. The review serves a dual purpose: first, it synthesizes existing knowledge, identifying key gaps; second, it allows us to develop a comprehensive framework to understand eco-social policymaking, based on a political system or systemic approach. This framework conceptualizes eco-social policies as the output of a process driven by escalating eco-social risks and concerns. Citizens' attitudes and voting behavior regarding social and environmental policies serve as the initial inputs that shape policy outputs. Within this system, eco- and welfare regimes represent the broader institutional contexts in which political parties and organized interest groups compete to find solutions to eco-social conflicts and eventually supply eco-social policies.

1 | Introduction

The relationship between social and ecological challenges has for long been "the missing link" of sustainable development (Laurent 2015). Over the past few years, an increased number of studies has addressed this gap, illustrating multiple connections between social and environmental policies (Cotta 2024; Bohnenberger 2023). Concepts such as "just transition" and "sustainable welfare" have emerged as dominant frameworks to capture this phenomenon. Notwithstanding the exponentially growing research efforts within the framework of the so-called eco-social debate, several theoretical, conceptual and empirical questions remain to be addressed in order to fully grasp how the ecological and social spheres interact across the different political systems and how policy innovation may be produced.

Taking stock of extant studies, this Special Issue investigates eco-social policies to improve our understanding of the intricate underlying regulatory and governance processes. Before introducing in detail the contributions to this Special Issue in section 4, the next sections provide a review of existing studies exploring the interconnections between social and ecological policies. The objective of our review is twofold. First, it provides an overview of the current knowledge on eco-social

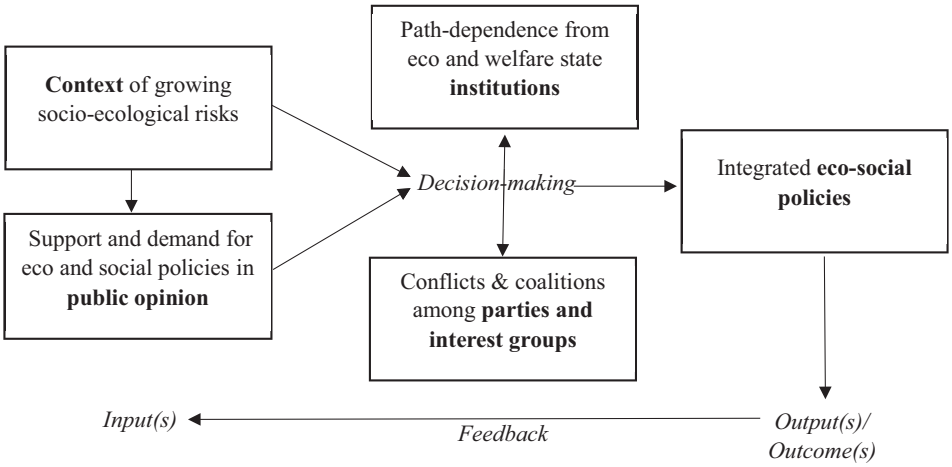

FIGURE 1 | A framework to analyze eco-social policymaking (*Source:* Authors' own elaboration, inspired by Easton 1965; Graziano and Hartlapp 2018).

policymaking, outlining emerging theoretical and analytical puzzles and identifying the main research gaps to fill, which this Special Issue contributes to addressing. Second, the article aims to systemize a variety of insights collected from the literature—and especially from theoretical studies on the drivers of eco-social policymaking (Zimmermann 2024; Gough 2016; Mandelli 2023)—into a comprehensive analytical framework.

The proposed framework is inspired by Easton's (1965) political system or systemic approach, which was further elaborated upon with specific reference to the European Union (EU) and to EU policies more recently (Graziano and Hartlapp 2018). From this perspective, in modern Western democracies, policy outputs, including decisions or actions, are the result of the functioning of a political system. This system comprises both institutions—which notably include established articulations of policies and governance structures that provide the "rules of the game" for decision-making—and political and social actors, who compete to supply policy outputs aligned with their interests and ideas. Actors and institutions are in turn shaped by citizens' demands and (electoral) support, which constitute the inputs of policymaking, channeling changes occurring in the broader contextual environment into the political system. Finally, the implementation of policy outputs can reshape context and inputs, as well as the political system, via so-called feedback effects.

We apply this framework to the case of eco-social policymaking, where eco-social policies emerge as the output of a process that begins in an environment characterized by growing eco-social risks, which in turn can be mitigated or exacerbated by the outcomes of eco-social policies via feedback effects. The inputs, shaped by citizens' attitudes and electoral behaviors toward social and environmental policies, influence the political system, where eco- and welfare regimes provide the overarching institutional settings in which various political parties and organized interest groups compete. The conceptual building blocks of the proposed framework are summarized in Figure 1, and they are explained one by one in the following sections. The framework is derived from the literature review presented below and it seeks to organize the state of the art, while it also helps identify the research gaps that the Special Issue contributes to address.

2 | Unpacking the Outputs of Eco-Social Policymaking

This section provides an overview of the growing literature investigating the interlinkages between social and ecological policies. Unlike other literature reviews in this field (Bohnenberger 2023), this is restricted to publications in the English language. First, we introduce the concepts of "just transition" and "sustainable welfare," which are the most frequently adopted frameworks highlighting why and how these two policy spheres should be brought together. Then, we focus on eco-social policies, which represent the outputs of the eco-social policymaking process, providing a definition and an overview of the examples studied in the literature. A critical reading of the literature shows that the definition of eco-social policies remains contested, empirical cases are relatively rare, and most studies do not focus on questions connected to implementation and governance.

2.1 | Just Transition and Sustainable Welfare

Over the last decade, public policy studies have paid growing attention to the interlinkages between social and ecological policies, though this strand of research is far from being consolidated. On the one hand, environmental studies have started incorporating questions on redistribution, social inequalities, and social justice, while on the other, welfare studies increasingly address ecological issues. This trend has translated into the lively academic and political debate around the concepts of just transition and sustainable welfare, which have the nature of eco-social policies among their main intellectual puzzles. Although real examples of eco-social policies are still relatively rare, they are often proposed as effective measures to simultaneously address social and ecological challenges. While the normative underpinnings of such policies have been widely discussed in the literature, the specific regulatory and governance settings of these innovative integrated public policies remain largely unexplored. Indeed, it is well known that environmental degradation and the policies put forward to contrast it may generate new social risks, which tend to disproportionately affect specific social groups (Gough et al. 2008). Conversely, welfare states have a considerable ecological footprint (Ottelin et al. 2018), which is

connected to the fact that they were developed to complement an unsustainable and growth-oriented capitalist model (Corlet Walker et al. 2021).

A critical case that exemplifies the eco-social nexus is the connection between inequality and climate change. Social inequality exacerbates climate change by increasing the demand for growth, encouraging ecological irresponsibility among the most affluent, weakening collective action and societal resilience, and lowering the least affluent's support for climate action (Gough 2019; Laurent and Pochet 2015). Conversely, climate change intensifies social disparities, as low-income people and other structurally disadvantaged social groups are consistently found to be the most vulnerable to the catastrophic impacts of climate change (IPCC 2014). This "double injustice" (Walker 2012) makes it so that the least responsible are also the most affected by climate impacts both within and between countries. Furthermore, climate mitigation policies, due to their regressive effects, may further exacerbate social inequalities (Büchs et al. 2011).

Against this background, at least two strands of literature aim to bring "the ecological" and "the social" spheres together. First, frameworks like "climate justice," "energy justice," and "environmental justice" emphasize the social dimension of environmental concerns. Climate justice focuses on distributing the benefits and burdens of climate change equitably by emphasizing human rights; energy justice applies justice principles to the entire energy lifecycle, from extraction to waste; and environmental justice seeks to ensure that all individuals are treated fairly and are involved in shaping environmental laws and policies (Heffron and McCauley 2018). Building on these approaches, the concept of "just transition" has emerged, focusing on the social justice implications of ecological transitions. Most of the literature on this topic concentrates on decarbonization—that is the move from carbon-intensive toward low-carbon economies—defining just transition as "a fair and equitable process of moving towards a post-carbon society" (McCauley and Heffron 2018: 2). Decarbonization is likely to impact people and communities unevenly (Thomas and Doerflinger 2020), widening social inequalities or creating new vulnerable workers, communities, companies, consumers, and even nations (Green and Gambhir 2020). Addressing the social challenges associated with low-carbon transitions requires a just transition framework that considers both the outcome and the process of decarbonization, hence both distributive and procedural justice (Galgóczi 2020). With growing popularity, just transition is also increasingly becoming a contested concept, with varying interpretations by different political actors (Stevis et al. 2020) and different usages across academic disciplines (Wang and Lo 2021).

The second notable strand of literature, building on green critiques to the welfare state (Fitzpatrick and Cahill 2002), revolves around the concept of sustainable welfare. This aspires to transform welfare systems to align them with ecological limits, ensuring that human needs are met within planetary boundaries, from an intergenerational and global perspective (Koch and Mont 2016; Hirvilammi and Koch 2020). Sustainable welfare hence aims to maintain a safe and just operating space for human activities below an "ecological ceiling" and above a "social foundation" of basic needs (Raworth 2017). To do so, different proposals have been advanced. For instance, Gough (2017) proposes a three-stage model moving from equitable green growth to recomposing consumption and ultimately to a post-growth stage of a global steady-state economy.

Fritz and Lee (2023, 320) define sustainable welfare as "a new social policy paradigm which deals with the problem of how to provide human welfare without undermining planetary well-being, by studying policy solutions that aim to create synergy between social justice, ecological sustainability and democratic participation." Bohnenberger (2020) suggests several criteria that sustainable welfare should attain to: they should fulfill human needs, promote social inclusion, remain within ecological boundaries, allow room for individual choice, be economically sustainable without relying on growth, and encourage transformative behaviors.

In sum, the concept of sustainable welfare builds on several schools of thought, which emphasize topics like societal well-being, human needs, capabilities, relational perspectives, ecofeminism, and participation (Fritz and Lee 2023; Murphy 2023). A central focus of these debates has been the welfare state's dependence on economic growth, which is widely seen as unsustainable (Bailey 2015; Buchs and Koch 2017). In this sense, the bulk of this literature aligns with a post-growth perspective, emphasizing social and ecological priorities while critically downplaying neoliberal economic imperatives.

2.2 | Eco-Social Policies

The sustainable welfare literature has largely contributed to the conceptualization of eco-social policies, seeking to bridge the gap between the social and environmental spheres, which have been traditionally governed as separate public policy domains. Gough (2013) was among the first to suggest a unified policy approach, arguing for a blending of social justice and ecological sustainability. Generally speaking, we may call eco-social policies those that *integrate* social and environmental policies (Mandelli 2022). Policy integration highlights the need for consistency, coherence, and congruence, suggesting that social and environmental policies should not only coexist but reinforce each other without undermining individual goals (Domorenok and Trein 2023). However, what exactly constitutes eco-social policy integration remains underspecified (Domorenok and Trein 2023).

As a result, there is no universally accepted definition of eco-social policy. At least three distinct approaches can be identified. The first focuses on policy *outcomes*, defining eco-social policies as those that deliver positive social and ecological results. This perspective aligns with the prescriptions of sustainable welfare, as it considers only those policies that achieve optimal outcomes in both domains. The second approach centers on policy *goals*, characterizing eco-social policies as those that explicitly seek to integrate social and environmental objectives. This can entail integrating social aims into environmental policies or incorporating ecological considerations into welfare policies. A third perspective defines eco-social policies in terms of the *problems* they address. From this viewpoint, eco-social policies are those

designed to respond to challenges emerging at the intersection of social and environmental domains—namely, eco-social risks.

While these definitional approaches may overlap, they do not always coincide, making eco-social policy a potentially contested concept, possibly subject to multiple interpretations. Despite the limitations posed by these competing definitions, they all converge on one key point: policy integration is the crucial defining feature of eco-social policies. It follows that policies which fail in any evident way to break the silos between social and environmental protection cannot be regarded as eco-social.

Various examples of eco-social policies are discussed in the literature. For instance, Bohnenberger (2020) examines whether measures like universal basic income, services, and vouchers could generate environmental benefits, suggesting they could foster social and ecological sustainability. Along similar lines, Büchs (2021) compares universal basic services with universal basic income according to their ability to advance eco-social goals. Public services are also proposed by Coote (2022), who argues in favor of such measures as they combine universality with sufficiency. McGann and Murphy (2023) and Murphy (2023) instead concentrate on income support, proposing participation income as an eco-social strategy that can move beyond productivist welfare. François et al. (2023) point to the importance of income and wealth gaps in achieving eco-social goals from a post-growth perspective. For both universal services and monetary support, the argument is that they can generate positive eco-social co-benefits by giving priority to sufficiency and human need satisfaction, and consequently also reducing the ecological footprint of production and consumption growth (Büchs 2021). However, the ecological impact of these measures is still debated: some authors argue that, to contribute positively to ecological outcomes, eco-social policies shall expressly incorporate environmental goals (e.g., coupling in-kind or in-cash benefits with environmental taxes or regulations) rather than taking synergies for granted (Büchs 2021).

Other policy areas that have been examined from an eco-social perspective include energy, housing and disaster management. More specifically, social energy tariffs have been suggested as an eco-social tool, with the idea that rates should increase with consumption and, thus, promote more mindful energy use and reduce emissions, particularly among high-income households (Gough 2019). Studies by Khan et al. (2020) and Winston (2022) highlight how sustainable housing and community regeneration projects can bring about significant social and environmental benefits. Finally, Brown and Chang (2024) stress the importance of eco-social policies as disaster relief tools, addressing the social risks connected to extreme weather events and other environmental hazards intensifying due to climate change.

The need to reform traditional policies through an eco-social lens has been highlighted with reference to welfare areas like pensions and employment. Research on pension schemes explored the challenges of adapting these systems for a green transition, questioning how pension funds might support climate-resilient investments (Natali et al. 2022). In the realm of employment, working time reduction is often proposed as a way to lower consumption and emissions while also enhancing individual well-being by increasing leisure time (Brandl and Zielinska 2020; although the environmental impact of more leisure time could be ambiguous as it heavily depends on how the free time is spent—see Hidasi et al. 2023). There has also been significant interest in aligning labor market policies with eco-social goals, advocating for a post-productivist shift (Dukelow 2022).

All these examples point to another key limitation of the eco-social policy literature, besides conceptual ambiguity, which has to do with a general lack of attention to empirical cases, as the predominant emphasis is put on ideal or small-scale policy proposals. An exception is given by studies that illuminate the development of the eco-social nexus at the supranational level. International organizations—such as the International Labor Organization, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the OECD—are developing innovative discourses aiming to better link social and environmental protection (Cigna et al. 2023; Schulze Waltrup et al. 2023).

This has been even more the case in the EU context, where several studies explored the emergence of a just transition policy approach, stemming from the commitment of the European Green Deal (EGD) to integrate social concerns into climate and decarbonization policies (Sabato and Mandelli 2024; Petmesidou and Guillén 2022; Graziano 2024). Though being strongly underpinned by green growth and ecological modernization rationales, the EGD also emphasizes the need to address the social consequences of the green transition, particularly for vulnerable energy and transport consumers, as well as workers and territories dependent on carbon-intensive industries. Novel policy instruments, like the Just Transition Mechanism and the Social Climate Fund, have been introduced to implement this new policy approach. The 2021 Just Transition Mechanism, backed by a €17.5 billion fund, promotes economic diversification and reskilling in territories with particularly carbon-intensive economies, mainly fossil fuel, but also hard-to-abate sectors. The 2023 Social Climate Fund instead seeks to allocate circa €86.7 billion, mostly derived from the revenues of the reformed EU carbon market, to offset rising energy and mobility costs by supporting green investments and assisting vulnerable consumers. Despite the latter representing innovative tools aiming to socialize the EU's climate policy, critical views have been expressed concerning the consistency and credibility of the EU's just transition framework, which is deemed insufficient, especially with regard to addressing eco-social risks and achieving significant progress in social and ecological outcomes (Crespy and Munta 2023).

Finally, from a policy analysis perspective, it is important to highlight that most of the studies on eco-social policies largely ignore questions connected to implementation, which have received comparatively less attention than other phases of policymaking, such as agenda-setting, formulation, adoption, and evaluation. This is an important knowledge gap to be addressed as it links to crucial governance aspects and, more broadly, to issues of procedural justice. Notably, the involvement of citizens and social groups—especially at-risk ones—in the implementation of eco-social policies would require more attention. Furthermore, more studies are needed to investigate the inter-institutional and multilevel governance of eco-social policies, shedding light on the conditions needed to break policy silos.

3 | Eco-Social Risks and Public Opinion: The Inputs in Eco-Social Policymaking

This section provides an overview of the relevant studies accounting for the inputs shaping eco-social policymaking. Specifically, it reflects on the context—or "environment," to use Easton's words (Easton 1965)—in which the policymaking process unfolds, as well as on the relevance of citizens' demands and support. Concerning context, a new wave of eco-social risks, generated by the climate and ecological crisis and the green transition, is emerging and potentially generating new problem pressures on the political system. With respect to public opinion, the literature provides useful hints about which subsets of the population are most likely to support and demand eco-social policies. More studies are needed to understand how eco-social risks and public opinion matter in shaping the policy process of eco-social policies. This Special Issue seeks to contribute to answering these questions.

3.1 | A Context of Growing Eco-Social Risks

Although the notion of eco-social risks is relatively new, it draws heavily on established research, particularly the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). The IPCC brought to light a broad spectrum of social risks associated with climate change, noting that risks to health, livelihoods, food security, water supply, human security, and economic stability will escalate with rising global temperatures (IPCC 2014). A similar encompassing approach to risks has been adopted by other international institutions such as the European Environment Agency (EEA 2024). However, not all risks connected to ecological issues and policies are social, as they can also be economic and cultural, for instance (Johansson et al. 2016). The added value of focusing on eco-social risk is to emphasize the potential role of welfare states in the era of the climate and ecological crisis, managing individual risks with collective welfare consequences.

While the study of eco-social risks is still in its infancy, several recurrent topics have emerged in this growing literature. First of all, the primary defining feature of eco-social risks is their environmental origin. Unlike traditional social risks, these are not tied to changes in labor markets or demographic-family dynamics, hence calling for a shift away from the work-welfare nexus (Hirvilammi et al. 2023). This makes them a "third wave" of risks, distinct from first- and second-generation social risks connected to industrial and post-industrial transformations (Johansson et al. 2016).

In categorizing eco-social risks, we may distinguish between two main types: direct and indirect risks (Mandelli et al. 2024). Direct risks stem from environmental hazards, such as extreme weather events, that are exacerbated by the ecological crisis. These risks are already impacting vulnerable populations, with disproportionate effects especially in the Global South and among marginalized communities with lower adaptive capacities. Direct risks can be immediate or unfold over a longer period, as it occurs, for instance, with increasing migration due to environmental stress (Gough et al. 2008).

Extant studies show that several indirect eco-social risks arise from the social consequences of environmental policies, primarily those aimed at climate mitigation, whereas the risks associated with climate adaptation remain underexplored. Schaffrin (2014) identifies two mechanisms through which climate policies affect public welfare: first, by creating direct costs that divert resources from other areas, like welfare state expenditure; and second, by influencing inequalities and redistributing social risks among population groups. Common examples of indirect risks include higher energy and transport prices due to carbon taxes and the labor market impacts of greening the economy (Johansson et al. 2016). Since indirect risks relate to the negative social outcomes of environmental policies, they represent a good example of how not only the context shapes policymaking, but policies can in turn reshape the context via so-called "feedback effects" (Pierson 1993).

Although eco-social risks are often portrayed as novel, they show elements of continuity with previous risks. As Gough and Meadowcroft (2011) note, many risks linked to climate change, such as floods and droughts, are not entirely new. What changes is their frequency, intensity, and distribution. More studies are needed to understand whether eco-social risks modify the current distributions of risks or rather amplify existing risks (Hirvilammi et al. 2023). As the above-presented double injustice argument points out, a widespread assumption in the literature is that the most vulnerable groups in the population will also be most impacted by eco-social risks. However, recent studies have, to some extent, challenged this assumption, indicating that in affluent welfare states, the lower-middle class is the most impacted by climate mitigation policies (Beaussier et al. 2024).

Studies highlight that eco-social risks are diffuse in space and time. Spatially, direct and indirect risks transcend national boundaries, affecting countries worldwide and complicating the welfare state's capacity to respond (Gough and Meadowcroft 2011), but they also hit more severely some specific territories, such as those relying on carbon-intensive economies or those geographically exposed to hazards (Oatley 2023). Temporally, the most severe impacts are projected for the future, with some risks, like rising sea levels, expected to become critical in the coming decades. Yet, several eco-social risks are already manifesting today, as extreme weather events and the early effects of decarbonization begin to reshape socio-economic dynamics (Schaffrin 2014; Johansson et al. 2016).

Lastly, scholars underscore the unpredictability, especially of direct eco-social risks. Traditional social risks, while individually unpredictable, are normally collectively predictable. In contrast, climate change introduces a layer of collective unpredictability due to its complex and diffuse nature (Gough et al. 2008). Hirvilammi et al. (2023) highlight that, unlike other social risks that affect clearly defined population groups, eco-social risks are less visible, more complex, and have a more uncertain and ambiguous impact. Other studies challenge these assumptions and suggest adopting a probabilistic approach to eco-social risks to foster evidence-based policymaking (Mandelli et al. 2024). Key dimensions to measure eco-social risks include individual and collective vulnerability, which affects one's sensitivity and capacity to adapt to risks; exposure to environmental hazards, such as extreme weather

events; and dependency on carbon-intensive goods and services (Mandelli et al. 2024). However, despite notable advancements, studies measuring the incidence of eco-social risks are still lacking.

3.2 | Public Opinion

Research on public opinion in the eco-social policy debate reveals complex and sometimes conflicting attitudes among different population groups regarding their propensity to support environmental and social policies. Jakobsson et al. (2018) examined the relationship between willingness to pay for environmental protection and support for redistributive policies. In Eastern European countries, they found a negative correlation: individuals favoring social policies were often less inclined to support environmental protection measures. Conversely, in countries like Canada, the United States, and Norway, respondents expressed concern for both welfare and environmental policies. Similarly, studies suggest that in advanced welfare and eco-states, such as the Nordic countries, individuals are generally more supportive of both policy domains (Otto and Gugushvili 2020; Fritz and Koch 2019; Fritz et al. 2021). These findings highlight a clear geographical divide, with Scandinavians, but also Italians, Spaniards, Germans, and Dutch showing greater support for both social and environmental policies compared to Eastern Europeans.

Attitudinal studies in eco-social policy typically measure support for ecological and social policies separately. Authors like Otto and Gugushvili (2020) and Fritz and Koch (2019) categorize people into four groups: those supporting both policies, those favoring one over the other, and those opposing both. Their analysis reveals distinct public support bases for social and environmental policies (Fritz and Koch 2019; Otto and Gugushvili 2020; Emilsson 2022; Ronchi et al. 2023; Fritz and Eversberg 2024). "Eco-social enthusiasts," who support both, tend to have higher education, higher incomes, egalitarian values, trust in institutions, and left-leaning views. They often live in urban areas, work in interpersonal fields such as care or education, and are less concerned about their job security. In contrast, skeptics of both policy areas are less likely to embrace universalist values and often align with right-wing populist movements. Preferences for environmental over social policies are more common among high-income individuals with moderate right-wing views and entrepreneurial backgrounds, whereas the lower-educated middle class, particularly in productive sectors, supports social protection but opposes green policies.

These patterns partially align with Inglehart's (1984) post-materialist theory, as individuals not struggling financially tend to prioritize environmental concerns. However, eco-social divides are shaped not only by social class and economic capital but also by ideological stances and cultural capital. Within the upper-middle class, only the socio-cultural professions consistently exhibit eco-social mentalities (Fritz and Eversberg 2024). This reflects the "GAL-TAN" framework (Hooghe et al. 2004)—which juxtaposes materialist and post-materialist cleavages—but it might also underscore the significance of other political cleavages, such as the rural–urban divide.

Being concerned with eco-social risks, both direct and policy-related ones, further influences support for or against eco-social policies (Gaikwad et al. 2022). Resistance to climate policies is strongest among the lower-middle class, who often work in carbon-intensive industries, drive diesel cars, and live in poorly insulated homes (Beaussier et al. 2024). Therefore, the winners and losers of the green transition align closely with those of globalization and automation (Ronchi et al. 2023; Kriesi et al. 2008). With respect to direct risks, studies show that citizens affected by extreme weather events tend to support parties promoting environmental policies (Birch 2023), although this appears to hold true especially for progressive voters (Hazlett and Mildenberger 2020).

Rather than measuring public opinion toward social and environmental policies separately, Armingeon and Bürgisser (2021) explore trade-offs, showing that, when forced to prioritize one option over the other, high-income individuals opt for environmental policies, while low-income ones focus on redistribution. Bergquist et al. (2020) conducted two conjoint experiments to explore how individuals make trade-offs when presented with various policy objectives. Their study found that people do not assess policy attributes in isolation; instead, they weigh them against each other. As such, connecting climate policies to economic and social ones appears to boost public support, particularly among low-income groups.

Attitudinal studies indicate that policies combining ecological and social goals and seeking to boost synergies (as opposed to trade-offs) can enjoy widespread support across the population. The 2020 Climate Survey by the European Investment Bank asked 30,700 respondents from the EU, UK, China, and the USA whether climate policies should account for income gaps and social inequality to be successful. Most respondents agreed, reflecting strong support for a just transition and the principle of leaving no one behind (European Investment Bank 2021). This aligns with findings by Bergquist et al. (2020), who showed that perceived fairness is the most significant determinant of public opinion in favor of climate taxes and laws, and by Beiser-McGrath and Bernauer (2019), who show that revenue recycling increases support for carbon taxes.

However, for public policy scholars, it is important to go beyond general support for a just transition and understand which specific eco-social policies are going to be demanded by the population. In this respect, Gaikwad et al. (2022) focus on the United States and India, revealing that while the average citizen favors broad measures such as investments in green technologies, those facing eco-social risks prefer a more diversified approach to compensation. Khan et al. (2023) use data from a representative survey in Sweden to assess support for five transformative eco-social policy proposals. They find working time reduction and wealth taxes to be supported by nearly half of their respondents, while maximum income, meat tax, and basic income are viewed with greater skepticism.

Finally, electoral studies have focused on policy feedback dynamics and, more specifically, have investigated the significance for voting behavior of adding a social dimension to climate policies. For example, in Germany, the construction of wind turbines bolstered the electoral success of both their proponents

and opponents (Otteni and Weisskircher 2022). However, right-wing populist parties seem to benefit the most electorally from the negative feedback effects of regressive climate policies, as shown in the Netherlands (Voeten 2024). Ultimately, the success of climate policies often hinges on compensation measures and eco-social policies that mitigate their socio-economic impacts. For instance, Spain's Just Transition Agreements, designed to phase out coal mining while also compensating affected workers and communities, proved electorally beneficial in coal municipalities for the incumbent Socialist Government that introduced this measure (Bolet et al. 2024). As said above, natural disasters can also shift voting patterns: in the UK, Labor gained votes in flood-affected areas after strengthening their environmental stance (Birch 2023).

In conclusion, much research has been published on public opinion on the eco-social nexus, exploring different aspects from various methodological and theoretical standpoints. Nevertheless, one key limitation that emerges from the literature review is that there is still little research focusing on public support for concrete examples of eco-social policies, hence limiting our understanding of how people's opinions actually impact the adoption, formulation, and implementation of these policies.

4 | Institutions and Actors in Eco-Social Policymaking

This section synthesizes the current academic knowledge on the characteristics and functioning of the decision-making process, where contextual factors and public opinion inputs can be processed and, at times, transformed into eco-social policy outputs. This implies focusing on the institutions and actors involved in eco-social policymaking. Regarding institutions, scholars frequently emphasize the path-dependent nature of the policy process, highlighting how established welfare and environmental institutions may shape new policy outputs. With respect to actors, although still limited, existing studies highlight the importance of conflicts and coalitions among political parties and interest groups operating at the intersection between the social and environmental policy domains. Despite the many advancements made by this relatively new research field, important gaps remain to be addressed, notably including conceptualizing and theorizing eco-welfare institutions and systematically assessing political parties and societal groups' preferences and interactions within the eco-social policy process.

4.1 | Institutional Arrangements for Eco-Welfare States

The concept of eco-welfare institutions has attracted increasing attention in recent years, as scholars have sought to understand the complex intersection between the structures, policies, ideas, and practices that constitute welfare and environmental states. The welfare state aims to ensure decommodification, providing individuals with a decent standard of living regardless of their labor market participation, and destratification, which involves distributing resources and opportunities more equally among the population (Esping-Andersen 1990). By contrast, the environmental state, or eco-state, can be described as one that maintains institutions dedicated to managing the environment and society's relationship with it (Duit et al. 2015). Drawing a parallel with the welfare state, an eco-state can be characterized by its function of decommodifying nature, recognizing that natural resources should not be treated purely as commodities, and preventing their unsustainable exploitation inherent in capitalist socio-economic systems (Zimmermann and Graziano 2020).

The concept of the welfare state is well-established in both theoretical and empirical terms, with scholars classifying states' performance based on their level of decommodification and destratification. Esping-Andersen's (1990) influential classification of welfare states outlined in his "Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism" remains a central analytical framework. This typology distinguishes between liberal regimes—displaying minimal state interference, with limited, means-tested benefits—conservative-corporatist regimes—where benefits are employment-related and largely funded by contributions—and social-democratic regimes—which offer universal social rights and high levels of redistribution (Esping-Andersen 1990). This typology has sparked ongoing debates and refinements (Van Kersbergen 2019), including for instance the addition of a Mediterranean or Southern-European model, which blends elements of social-democratic and conservative-corporatist regimes (Ferrera 1996).

By contrast, the theoretical and conceptual framework of the environmental state is much less solid. Some scholars distinguish between "environmental" and "green" states, or between "weak" and "strong" environmental regimes (Eckersley 2004; Meadowcroft 2005; Dryzek et al. 2003; Christoff 1996). Weak environmental regimes are typically technocratic, neo-corporatist, and technology-driven, whereas strong regimes are characterized by ecological sustainability, systemic thinking, democratic governance, and global outreach. Strong ecological states arguably remain a largely aspirational ideal-typical model, as most of the existing environmental states only promote "lifeworld," rather than "systemic," sustainability (Hausknost 2020). Efforts to capture varieties of green states have focused on the strength of environmental regulation, the characteristics of governance systems (Liefferink et al. 2009; Duit 2016), or countries' ecological performance (Jahn 2014; Koch and Fritz 2014). The debate surrounding the task of "rethinking the green state" (Bäckstrand and Kronsell 2015) has opened up important reflections on the role of the state in sustainability transitions—specifically, how it can effectively address the complex challenges of climate change and sustainability. This includes managing the deep entrenchment of environmental issues within economic systems and production processes, particularly in light of the recent decarbonization agenda (Eckersley 2018; Hildingsson et al. 2018).

Recent scholarship has attempted to bridge welfare and environmental state theories to investigate the institutional dimension of the eco-social nexus. Meadowcroft (2005) argues that there are significant parallels between the welfare and eco-states. Both extend the state's authority to new areas of social life, address market failures, face considerable economic and institutional constraints, and often lead to conflicts among political and societal groups. The main differences between the welfare and the eco states lie in the type of political actors involved in policymaking, the temporal and spatial scope of the issues

addressed, and the relationship with economic growth. While welfare states have historically developed complementarily with economic growth, environmental policies are meant to challenge unlimited production and consumption growth to limit its ecological impacts. Despite these differences, Gough (2016) suggests that the environmental state may have emerged by layering on top of the welfare state, hinting that existing welfare regimes could shape the trajectory of environmental policies in a path-dependent manner.

Some studies have sought to empirically assess the interconnections between welfare and environmental institutions, exploring synergies and trade-offs (Hasanaj 2023). The "synergy hypothesis" proposes that countries with robust social-democratic welfare models would also exhibit strong environmental policies (Dryzek et al. 2003; Gough et al. 2008). However, research testing this hypothesis provides mixed results. Koch and Fritz (2014) used correspondence analysis to examine structural indicators of welfare and sustainability in thirty countries. They found no clear evidence that environmental performance systematically aligns with welfare regime types, concluding that factors beyond welfare institutions are necessary to explain variations in environmental outcomes across countries.

Through cluster analysis at the European level, Zimmermann and Graziano (2020) examined countries' social and ecological performances using the concept of decommodification of labor and nature. While they found some evidence to confirm the synergy hypothesis, they also point to no significant systematic correspondence between countries' performances in the two policy fields. They also note that economic models, production systems, and energy consumption patterns play the strongest role in determining different "worlds of eco-welfare states." García-García et al. (2022) employed a broader set of variables to assess the relationship between social and environmental performances, ultimately rejecting the synergy hypothesis. Finally, Hasanaj (2023) employs model-based cluster analysis in 42 countries across different world regions and finds established eco-welfare state regimes in several industrialized countries, as well as developing eco-welfare regimes in less-industrialized ones.

These findings suggest that while there might be some interactive effects between welfare and environmental institutions, there is no consensus on the existence of eco-welfare states, nor on how countries across the globe cluster together around different varieties of eco-welfare regimes. Hasanaj (2023, 46) offers an interesting working definition of the concept of eco-welfare state as "a political and economic system in which the government simultaneously prioritizes environmental protection and citizen wellbeing. It emphasizes harmonized policies and programs that promote environmental sustainability and social well-being, with particular attention to climate change mitigation and adaptation measures, as well as social protection and investment for the people." The theoretical and empirical research work on eco-welfare institutions remains an area for further exploration and this would be crucial to understand whether and how institutions influence eco-social policymaking and what is the role of path dependence in this specific case.

One crucial largely unexplored aspect pertains to the institutional constraints and obstacles facing eco-social policy-making and the development of eco-welfare states. Indeed, in most modern democracies, responsibilities for social policy and environmental policy tend to be segregated in different institutions, in a manner that has been described through the image of "policy silos" A shared assumption in the literature is that such silos can prevent policymakers from identifying and boosting eco-social synergies. In worst-case scenarios, silos might also generate trade-offs and conflicts between different state institutions or governance levels, for instance when budgetary constraints impose distributional conflicts between different state agencies competing for funds.

4.2 | Parties and Interest Groups

As with any other public policy, the regulation and governance of eco-social policies are likely to depend heavily on political parties that compete electorally by offering different policy proposals, as well as on organized interest groups and societal movements seeking to influence decision-making. The interactions among these actors—whether conflictual or consensual—stem from the politicization of societal cleavages (Rokkan 1970). Various political cleavages have historically characterized the politics of social and environmental policies.

The class cleavage has been particularly prominent in welfare studies. Korpi's (1983) power resource theory famously posits that left-wing parties and trade unions advocate for working-class interests by promoting generous welfare provisions, while center-right parties and business groups would prioritize lower taxes and reduced social spending to represent more affluent voters. However, class is not the only cleavage mobilized in the political arena and influencing social policy changes. Ferrera (1993) highlights how the fragmentation of the political landscape through territorial, ethnolinguistic, or religious cleavages can pose significant challenges to the development of universal social policies. In highly polarized systems, coalition-building becomes more difficult, weakening prospects for broad-based welfare reforms. Studies on the politics of the welfare state typically focus on left–right partisan dynamics and the roles of trade unions and employers, while also examining the contributions of civil society organizations and local governments (Natili 2019).

In environmental politics, green parties (Müller-Rommel 1989) along with the environmental organizations and movements from which these parties emerged (Dryzek et al. 2003) and organizations representing "green" capitalist interests (Falkner 2008) are often key for environmental policy changes. Their presence in the political sphere is interpreted in two main ways in the literature. One approach explains environmental politics through post-materialist or GAL-TAN cleavages, linked to the rise of a widespread "new middle class" (Eckersley 1989) that can afford to prioritize environmental concerns. A more recent interpretation, rooted in comparative political economy, instead emphasizes the distributive implications of environmental policies and the importance of material self-interest—particularly the uneven social distribution of costs and benefits—in shaping environmental conflicts (Schwander and Fischer 2025).

Despite extensive research on the partisan and interest-group politics of social and environmental policies, few studies have

examined the role of these actors in integrating the two policy fields. Research on political parties is especially scarce. Lim and Duit (2018), using panel data from 25 OECD countries (1975–2005), argue that governments shape environmental policies by considering their distributive implications within existing welfare regimes. Their analysis reveals that left-wing governments are more likely to expand environmental policies in generous welfare states, where labor costs can be offset and trade-offs minimized through social policies. Conversely, in countries with limited welfare provisions, right-wing governments are more likely to adopt environmental policies, as flexible welfare regimes enable businesses to absorb regulatory costs more easily.

Derndorfer et al. (2022), using the Comparative Manifesto Project Database, analyzed how environmental, social, and economic issues are addressed in electoral programs across Europe. Their findings show that while the salience of environmental policies has grown steadily since the 1960s, economic and welfare issues remain more prominent overall, particularly in Eastern and Southern Europe. The rise in environmental concerns has been largely driven by ecological parties, which dedicate about 20% of their manifestos to environmental issues, compared to 5%–10% among other party families. Regarding integration, environmental issues are most often linked to economics and technology, though green and social democratic parties frequently connect environmental concerns with welfare. Fischer and Giuliani (2025) also use party manifestos to investigate the multi-dimensional politics of eco-social policies during the 2021 German federal election. Their findings reveal that most parties, except the far-right, emphasize eco-social synergies, yet the left is more prone to frame the eco-social nexus in terms of state involvement, social consumption, selective targets, and degrowth.

Social movements are also crucial in the politics of eco-social policies, as demonstrated by the case of the Yellow Vests mobilization in France, which criticized the unequal distributive impacts of the carbon tax and demanded policies integrating ecological and social concerns. However, attention to eco-social policies in the academic debate on organized interest groups and social movements remains relatively limited. An exception is labor environmentalism, which examines trade unions' environmental stances and integrates environmental studies with industrial relations (Räthzel and Uzzell 2013). Labor environmentalism seeks to challenge the so-called "jobs vs. environment dilemma" (Räthzel and Uzzell 2011; Kalt 2021), where unions are seen as trapped in environmentally degrading economic activities due to their structural dependencies (Tomassetti 2020; Wissen and Brand 2021). Instead, many unions have actually overcome such barriers, integrating environmental protection into their strategies, sometimes with some resistance and some other times more proactively (Thomas and Doerflinger 2020).

Research on trade unions' role in just transitions has primarily focused on their actions and preferences at various levels (Wang and Lo 2021). Studies show that unions' attitudes toward just transitions vary significantly, often reflecting the governance levels at which they operate (Thomas and Pulignano 2021) and their interpretation of the contested just transition concept (Stevis et al. 2020; Kalt 2022). Barca (2015, 392) notes that just transition claims range "from a simple claim for job creation in the green economy to a radical critique of capitalism and a refusal of market solutions." Similarly, the Just Transition Research Collaborative (2018) identifies four approaches to classify trade unions' preferences in this field: status quo (market-driven green job creation), managerial reform (adjustments to labor standards), structural reform (democratizing governance and decision-making), and transformative (addressing systemic inequalities such as racism and classism alongside environmental concerns).

Beyond unions, other interest groups can be expected to influence the politics of eco-social policies. Despite having received little attention in the eco-social debate, business and finance actors are regarded as crucial in the broader field of the political economy of climate policies, which typically separates opponents and supporters of climate action depending on whether they are rooted in emission-intensive ("brown") or green sectors (Schwander and Fischer 2025). Research at the local level shows that firms are important for the development of eco-social policies, highlighting their interconnections with other societal and institutional actors (Bonetti and Villa 2023).

Labor environmentalism has underscored trade unions' role in building coalitions with other societal groups around the just transition concept (Winkler 2020), notably with green NGOs (Jessoula and Mandelli 2022). These alliances are expected to play a crucial role in shaping eco-social policymaking. Indeed, research on socio-technical sustainability transitions has emphasized the importance of the composition and competition between coalitions (Hess 2014). Coalition-building is hence expected to be equally critical in the politics of just transition. Mandelli (2025) examines the formation of winning coalitions advocating for just transitions in Spain and Ireland, showing how these coalitions united actors promoting decarbonization with those representing at-risk groups. Price et al. (2024) compare just transition coalitions in the U.S. States of Washington and Colorado, showing their variability. Power resources, institutional embeddedness, and discursive framing are key to determining coalitions' transformative ambition and ability to influence policymaking (Ciplet 2022; Kalt 2021). Furthermore, often, these coalitions emerge through negotiated pacts, allowing actors with originally conflicting interests to find common ground. This is what underpinned the emergence of the EU Just Transition Fund, as well as other national-level just transition policies, which relied on a side-payment logic, compensating some stakeholders in exchange for their political support for climate mitigation (Crespy and Munta 2023; Kyriazi and Miró 2023; Mandelli 2025).

Finally, the literature on the comparative political economy of climate policymaking suggests that actors' influence on the policy process varies across different institutional settings. Similarly, we may expect that the interplay between institutions and actors matters also in eco-social policymaking. However, the evidence is puzzling. Some studies suggest that democracies with proportional party systems and/or multi-stakeholder models of interest representation are more likely to lead to significant environmental policy changes because these systems would allow different actors to appease eventual conflicts (Böhmelt et al. 2016; Finnegan 2022). In contrast, other studies

suggest that a green transition can advance more smoothly and significantly when decision-making powers are concentrated in the hands of state actors, since an environmentalist government may take decisions without having to compromise with other interests (Meckling and Nahm 2021; Rentier et al. 2019).

5 | An Overview of the Special Issue

The overview of the state of the art in the field of eco-social policies has shown some key gaps. Importantly, more empirical examples of eco-social policies need to be studied, especially with a focus on the underlying policymaking process and on questions connected to governance and implementation, which have been largely ignored so far. Furthermore, more studies are needed to test the actual causal role in eco-social policymaking of some key drivers identified in this introduction: risks, public opinion, socio-political actors, and institutions. Finally, also important would be to evaluate the extent to which eco-social policy outcomes may contribute to achieving the objectives advanced by the sustainable welfare and just transition agendas.

The articles collected by this Special Issue contribute to tackling some of these research gaps and further advancing the eco-social research agenda in several ways, especially in view of the need to (i) analytically elaborate on the link that exists between social and environmental domains across different policy fields; (ii) disentangle the factors that shape eco-social policies; (iii) spell out the multi-level nature of the related policy-making processes, and (iv) expand the empirical scope of comparative studies on eco-social policies and policymaking. As a whole, the Special Issue provides an overview of how eco-social policies are designed and implemented in the fields of climate adaptation and natural disaster management, green energy, education, labor, and ecological transition. It also unveils the way in which the perceptions and strategies of public and private actors within different governance settings shape the content and implementation path of such policies. Last but not least, the collection deploys a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods to illuminate the multitude of features that distinguish eco-social policies and governance.

More specifically, regarding perceptions, attitudes, and policy developments, the article by Brizga et al. advances existing research on public opinion and eco-social policies by examining how stakeholders' views on the desirability and feasibility of specific labor and service-related measures are shaped within the framework of the normative propositions of sustainable welfare. Using a policy Delphi approach, involving experts and stakeholders from five European countries (Germany, Hungary, Latvia, Spain, and Sweden), the analysis shows that eco-social policies are challenged by established growth and labor paradigms, which transcend welfare-regime-related, ideological, social and institutional rationales. Additionally, a key research finding is that iterative processes can help reshape stakeholders' perceptions and uncover areas of consensus as well as persistent disagreement.

Adopting a broader and original comparative perspective on the relationship between policies and public opinion, the contribution by Lindh and Nelson illustrates that unless an eco-social approach is adopted, climate mitigation policies tend to face considerable public opposition, particularly fossil fuel taxes that impose visible costs on households and are often perceived as unfairly distributed. Using multilevel modeling with data from the European Social Survey and the Social Policy Indicators database, the article examines how means-tested social assistance—primarily providing a minimum income floor for vulnerable households—shapes public support for increased fossil fuel taxes in 20 European countries. The findings suggest that traditional forms of income protection through the welfare state, particularly social assistance programs providing basic economic security for low-income households, are crucial for fostering eco-social synergies and building public support for scaling up government-led climate action and decarbonization efforts.

The article by Parth contributes to a deeper understanding of the previously understudied political dynamics underlying eco-social policies. More specifically, it analyzes the implementation of mandatory insurance policies for natural disasters, which are underpinned by an eco-social approach, in Switzerland, Austria, and Germany. This contribution shows that political dynamics, including public salience, partisan politics, interest groups, and multilevel governance, rather than economic factors, have shaped the distinctly different insurance systems found across countries: compulsory insurance in Switzerland, a catastrophe fund in Austria, and an unregulated market with ad hoc state aid in Germany.

The main argument of the article by Bender and Kinderman is that green subsidies increase the political support and viability for eco-social policies. By investigating interest groups' positions—actors whose influence has so far been understudied—on green subsidies in Germany (subsidies, qualification and training measures, coal phase out strategy, green housing) and in the United States (climate related tax credits, Inflation Reduction Act, green housing), the authors illustrate that well-crafted green subsidies reduce opposition and increase support for eco-social policy, regardless of institutional differences between the two countries. When analyzing Donald Trump's second presidency, the authors suggest that green subsidies help to advance the green transformation even in the context of significant political adversity.

A novel multilevel governance perspective on the analysis of the realization of Sustainable European Energy Markets in the Trinational Upper Rhine Region, conducted by Leopold et al. in Germany, France, and Switzerland, shows how the different perceptions, visions, and attitudes of various actors—including local and regional authorities, public organizations supporting renewable energy projects, energy suppliers, grid operators, community energy cooperatives, environmental associations, and engineering firms—mattered for managing conflicts and tensions related to the expansion of renewable energy infrastructures in this cross-border macro region. The need to support the energy transition with social protection measures to ensure a just transition and reduce eco-social conflicts is among the main findings of the article, which is based on 66 qualitative interviews.

The article by Cotta et al. provides a large-N comparative overview assessing the success of the European Union's efforts to

promote eco-social policies at the national level. In addition to identifying and exploring the eco-social features of one of the most important redistributive policies of the EU - the Recovery and Resilience Facility, that aims to pursue both climate and social policy goals under the umbrella strategy for a 'just transition' - the study investigates how the EU regulation was transposed into the National Recovery and Resilience Plans. The article shows a high diversity and variability of the patterns of eco-social policies, which was largely determined by governmental preferences, vocal interest groups and experts involved in domestic policymaking.

The article authored by Carstensen et al. expands the theoretical perspective on eco-social policies by exploring the relevance of a polycentric governance as a tool of eco-social policy integration illustrated by the analysis of green reforms of the Danish educational and training policies. Their study also shows how polycentric governance institutions enable the engagement of constituent actors in innovation and constructive collaborations over reforming education programs to integrate ecological goals into vocational training. A key finding is that a smooth eco-social policy integration has been facilitated by the following governance processes: developing agreement among actors with clashing material interests about what a green transformation entails; identifying how joint gains can be reached within a common economic vision; and setting up an institutional structure that supports continuous adjustment to respond to technological advances and shifting social demands.

Brandl's article addresses several identified gaps in existing eco-social debates, focusing specifically on the lack of an analytical framework to capture eco-social policy integration. By engaging critically with policy integration literature from an eco-social and processual perspective, the article proposes to focus on the integration of the social and the environmental sector through an original analytical entry point disentangling the 'who, what and how' in processes of policy integration, and differentiating material from symbolic dimensions in the process of policy integration. Brandl also emphasizes the importance of multiple governance levels and stages of the policy process in shaping the integration processes. Ultimately, the article strengthens the conceptual understanding of eco-social policy integration by highlighting the role of policy actors and symbolic dimensions.

Finally, Cremer's contribution examines how and to what extent the EGD influences national eco-social policy narratives and dynamics, using Germany as a case study. While the EU promotes integrated climate and social policies, national approaches often remain fragmented. Analyzing stakeholder communications through a combination of text analysis and qualitative methods, the study identifies three groups of actors: less-equipped challengers, well-equipped challengers, and incumbents. The findings suggest that while the EGD is used strategically by different actors, it is unlikely to trigger fundamental change in national policy approaches.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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