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Public support for eco-social policies: insights from focus group studies in Germany and Italy

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Introduction

In light of the ongoing climate crisis, the notion of just transition is increasingly endorsed by scientists and policy makers in Europe. The concept implies that the costs and benefits of the transition to a 'net zero' – a state in which the overall emission of greenhouse gases is limited to the volume the ecological system can absorb – should be fairly distributed across territories and social groups (Wang and Lo, 2021). A critical tool for facilitating a just transition is eco-social policies, which pursue 'both environmental and social goals in an integrated way' (Mandelli, 2022, p 334). This integration can come from both sides, either by adding a social dimension to climate policies or by designing social policies in an ecologically sustainable way. The former often involves redistributive policies to ensure environmental measures do not increase social inequalities (Gugushvili and Otto, 2023).

However, there are multiple occasions when social and environmental objectives come into conflict with each other. One prominent example is the closure or downscaling of the fossil fuel industry, which can lead to permanent unemployment for some workers. Another one is the increasing pressure on public budgets to finance large-scale environmental policies, which in turn may force the governments to cut spending on welfare provision – by far the largest spending item in European welfare states (Armingeon and Bürgisser, 2021).

Against this background, an important question becomes how the broader public perceives environmental and social policies in general and how these broad-brushed eco-social ideational predispositions relate to people's positions concerning specific eco-social policies (first research question). Even though several recent studies investigate the intersection of attitudes towards environmental and social policies (for example, Fritz and Koch, 2019; Otto and Gugushvili, 2020; Emilsson, 2022a; Ronchi et al, 2023), a

lot is yet to be learned, especially about attitudes towards specific eco-social policies and related trade-off scenarios. Moreover, the existing evidence is exclusively quantitative, limiting an in-depth understanding of the reasoning behind people's opinions. How different social groups make sense of their policy stances on eco-social policies and trade-off scenarios remains unclear (second research question).

In this chapter, we aim to help narrow this knowledge gap by providing original qualitative evidence on people's attitudes towards two types of public policies – retraining laid-off workers from fossil fuel industries (an eco-social policy) and closing these industries (a trade-off scenario). Our analysis draws on survey and discussion data collected during several focus groups in Germany and Italy in 2022. Findings suggest that attitudes towards general climate and social policies are somewhat related to attitudes towards specific integrated eco-social and trade-off policy scenarios. However, people's opinions also depend on various other factors, including their socio-economic position, perceptions of state responsibility and capacity to address social and climate objectives in an integrated way, and existing levels of welfare provision. In what follows, we first discuss existing public opinion research on eco-social attitudes and formulate several working hypotheses. Next, we describe our data and present the results. The concluding part examines the theoretical implications of our findings and proposes avenues for future research.[1]

Eco-social divides: a conceptual perspective

Only recently, scholars have started studying environmental and social policy preferences in combination. Accordingly, the relevant literature is still in its infancy. In a pioneering study, Spies-Butcher and Stebbing (2016) sought to understand the social policy preferences of the Australian political constituency supporting climate action in the 2007 national elections. Their analysis showed that identifying climate change as a top policy priority was associated with a higher preference for additional social spending over tax cuts. However, the association between prioritising climate change and the preference for income and wealth redistribution to ordinary people was actually negative, even if statistically non-significant.

Later, Jakobsson and colleagues (2018) explored the relation between environmental and welfare issues from a cross-national perspective. Using data from three waves of the International Social Survey, they tested whether people supporting income redistribution are more willing to pay for environmental policies ('double-worry' hypothesis) or are more opposed to it ('crowding-out' hypothesis). While the country-level analysis did not find any correlation between the two aspects, the individual-level results supported the crowding-out hypothesis, implying that pro-redistribution

individuals were less willing to pay for environmental protection. However, further decomposing the analysis to the country level revealed a significant heterogeneity in the link between the two sets of attitudes – with 'double worry' present in some countries, 'crowding out' in others and no relation in still others.

An alternative approach is offered by Otto and Gugushvili (2020). Instead of measuring linear correlations between environmental and welfare attitudes, they focused on identifying four attitudinal sub-groups based on survey respondents' views on the two sets of policies. These groups are 'eco-social policy enthusiasts' ('ENTHs': people supporting both ecological and social policy measures), 'environmental devotees' ('ENVIs': people with high preferences for environmental measures combined with low support for public welfare provision), 'welfare enthusiasts' ('WELFs': pro-welfare people with low support for environmental policies) and 'eco-social policy sceptics' ('SCEPs': people opposed to both sets of policies). To record the occurrence of these eco-social attitudinal groups in European countries, the authors used data from the 2016 round of the European Social Survey. They measured welfare attitudes with three questions about the government's responsibility to ensure a reasonable living standard for the old and the unemployed and sufficient childcare services for working parents. Environmental attitudes were approximated by three questions about respondents' views on increasing taxes on fossil fuels, subsidising renewable energy and banning the sale of the least energy-efficient household appliances. The analyses revealed an 'eco-social divide' whereby each of the four attitudinal groups was represented in European countries, but their actual size varied. Regarding the group composition, 'ENTHs' were more likely to be women, higher educated people, urban residents and people with an egalitarian worldview and high levels of trust in public institutions. By contrast, 'SCEPs' were mainly male, rural residents, lower-educated people, those with low trust in public institutions and those opposed to egalitarianism. 'ENVIs' were found to be comparable to eco-social enthusiasts in their socio-economic profiles but more likely to earn higher incomes. 'WELFs' were more likely to be low-skilled, low-income earners supporting egalitarianism and demonstrating low trust in public institutions.

While the existence of such socio-economic eco-social divides (Otto and Gugushvili, 2020) was also confirmed by other authors (Fritz and Koch, 2019; Emilsson, 2022b; Ronchi et al, 2023), in particular, one crucial limitation remains: existing datasets address social and environmental attitudes separately. Combining preferences towards social and environmental policies, for instance, via the categorical grouping approach developed by Otto and Gugushvili, can tell us much about the distinct profiles and preferences of different attitudinal groups – but it leaves us with an incomplete understanding of what people think of cases where environmental and social policies are

explicitly interlinked or weighed against each other. One of the very few studies so far addressing eco-social trade-off scenarios showed that in the absence of a trade-off between the two policies, left-wing voters were more supportive of social and environmental policies than right-wing voters, and earning a higher income decreased social policy support but had no significant effect on environmental policy support (Armingeon and Bürgisser, 2021). However, once the respondents had to choose between income redistribution and environmental protection, the impact of political ideology disappeared while that of income remained. The authors interpret this as an indication that in the case of policy trade-offs, myopic self-interest (for example, maximising current income) overrides people's ideological positioning. These findings indicate possible conflicts but give policy makers little insight into the public's position on specific eco-social policies and how people justify their stances.

To address this gap, we carried out an integrated analysis of (non-representative) survey data and focus group discussions. Drawing on Otto and Gugushvili's four attitudinal sub-groups, our study aimed to investigate, on the one hand, to what extent public support for various climate and social policies relates to support for specific integrated or conflicting eco-social policies. On the other hand, we sought to capture the beliefs, perceptions and nuanced attitudes individuals hold when faced with different eco-social policy scenarios. Specifically, we investigated people's views on retraining workers laid off in fossil fuel industry jobs and on preserving jobs in these industries, which involves a trade-off between environmental and social objectives. We expected that individuals' grouping along the four attitudinal sub-groups could, to a certain extent, approximate their positions on the two policy options. However, this relationship is likely to be influenced by other factors at the individual and the country level. For instance, we might expect that, due to social considerations, WELFs will oppose climate policies with extensive social consequences (such as closing polluting companies). However, they might support such measures if they were accompanied by social investment or compensatory policies. ENVIs should support closing polluting industries, but they may also support retraining fossil fuel workers to spur decarbonisation infrastructure and technologies and to weaken opposition to the energy transition. The position of ENTHs is more complicated to anticipate. It likely depends on whether social or ecological concerns weigh more concerning a specific eco-social or trade-off policy scenario. Finally, SCEPs are expected to oppose both measures as they do not prioritise environmental or social protection.

Mapping eco-social attitudes: the focus group survey

To address the identified research gap, we employ focus group data from the research project 'The social legitimacy of welfare measures in the *green*

transformation' (see Zimmermann and Gengnagel, 2022). In the project, a total of 76 participants in Germany (DE) and Italy (IT) discussed in 12 focus groups (6 per country; 5–7 participants per group) the subjects of climate change, climate and social policies, social inequalities, the role of the state and scientific expertise. The focus groups took place online in July 2022. They lasted 90 minutes each, were led by research teams in both countries and were professionally recruited and moderated by a multinational market research firm. In each country, half of the participants had a higher socio-economic position (income above 150 per cent of the median net household income; at least upper secondary education/ International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) 3), and the other half had a lower socio-economic position (below 75 per cent of the median net household income; at most intermediate education). In addition, participants varied systematically in terms of their values (conservative versus liberal, measured, for example, by approval of same-sex relationships) and had a mix of gender, age, occupation and place of residence (urban/rural).

Before the discussion started, all focus group participants completed a survey with several items. After this, participants discussed issues such as decarbonisation effects on jobs and the economy, redistributive questions in the context of green transitions, sustainable consumption and the role of science. These discussions were recorded, transcribed and studied using qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz, 2019). From the survey part, we use seven items to answer the first research question of how attitudes towards several social and climate policies as attitudinal predispositions relate to attitudes towards concrete eco-social and trade-off policies. The items used to measure respondents' eco-social predisposition include two of the classic social policies and the three climate policies used by Otto and Gugushvili (2020), namely whether the government should be responsible for a standard of living for i) the old and ii) the unemployed, and to what extent respondents favour iii) an increasing of taxes on fossil fuels, iv) subsidies for renewable energy, and v) banning the sale of the least energy-efficient appliances to reduce climate change. For opinions on integrated eco-social and trade-off policy scenarios, participants were asked to what extent they agree with governmental action to retrain workers laid off in fossil fuel industries and action to preserve these jobs. We chose the 'jobs versus environment dilemma' (Räthzel and Uzzell, 2011) as a salient and widespread social issue in the public energy transition debate. All answer categories were originallymeasured on a five-point Likert scale and later recoded for analytical simplicity (1: opposition to the policy in question, 2: neither/nor, 3: support for the policy in question).

Calculating the average values for social and climate policy–related survey responses by each focus group participant, it is possible to group participants in the four different attitudinal eco-social sub-groups: those

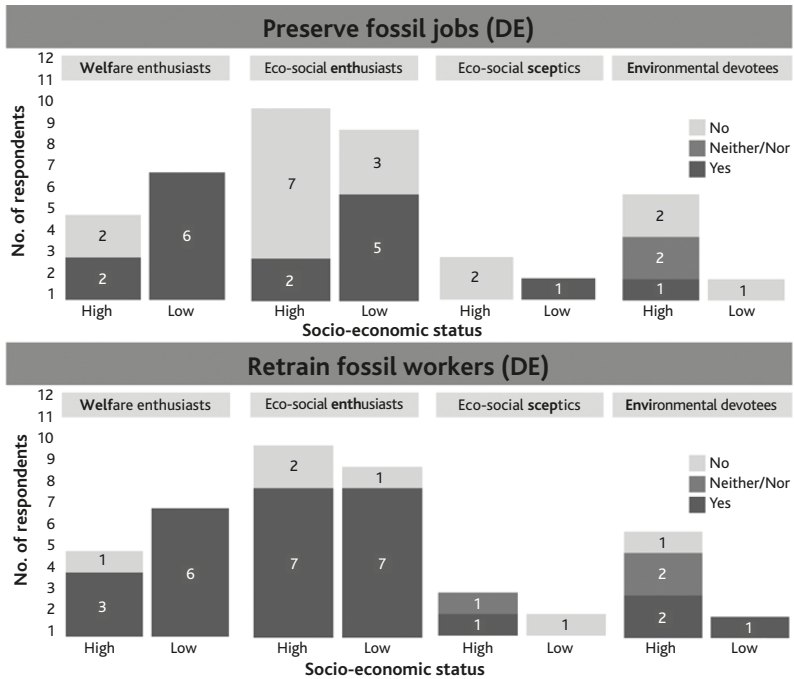
with average values above 2 for the three climate policy items and the two social policy items are grouped as ENTHs; those with average values above 2 for the climate policy items and average values equal to or below 2 for the social policy items are labelled as ENVIs; those with average values above 2 for the social policy items and values equal to or below 2 for the climate items are grouped as WELFs; and those with average values equal to or below 2 for climate and social policies are assigned to the group of SCEPs.

For both countries, this exercise shows that most focus group participants place themselves in the ENTH group, supporting climate and social policies (48.6 per cent in DE; 47.5 per cent in IT). The second largest group in both countries consists of the WELFs (27 per cent in DE; 30 per cent in IT). While the ENVIs are still represented by 16.2 per cent of the participants in DE and 17.5 per cent in IT, the SCEPs are rare in both countries (8.1 per cent in DE; 5 per cent in IT). Concerning the socio-economic composition of these groups, there are slightly more participants with a lower socio-economic position among the WELFs and the ENTHs. Relating to the eco-social and trade-off policy scenarios, we see that 'retraining fossil fuel workers' receives strong support in both countries (75 per cent in DE; 81.6 per cent in IT). By contrast, 'preserving fossil fuel jobs' is less supported and much more controversial (47.2 per cent in favour, 47.2 per cent against, remaining neither/nor in DE; 55.3 per cent in favour, 23.7 per cent against, remaining neither/nor in IT). When checking how support for the two controversial eco-social scenarios is distributed among the four eco-social attitudinal sub-groups and across socio-economic backgrounds, an interesting picture emerges (Figure 9.1).

In Germany, focus group participants identified as WELFs support both retraining fossil fuel workers and preserving the jobs in these industries. However, participants from the lower socio-economic group especially hold a positive opinion on these two controversial aspects. So, both policy scenarios seem to resonate with their social concerns. Participants identified as ENVIs are expectably critical of fossil fuel job preservation and more supportive of retraining fossil fuel workers. While participants identified as SCEPs are critical towards both, the stances of those grouped as ENTHs are more complicated. Comparable to the WELFs, ENTHs support the retraining policy, with the lower socio-economic group being slightly more favourable than the higher one. However, in contrast to our expectations, we also see ENTHs (especially those from the lower socio-economic group) supporting preserving fossil fuel jobs. Keeping these jobs could resonate with these ENTHs' interest in social policy issues.

In Italy, the situation is more complex. As Figure 9.2 demonstrates, for WELFs, the situation is comparable to the German one. Participants supporting public social policies also strongly support retraining and – to

Figure 9.1: Policy response patterns by attitudinal predisposition and socio-economic status, Germany

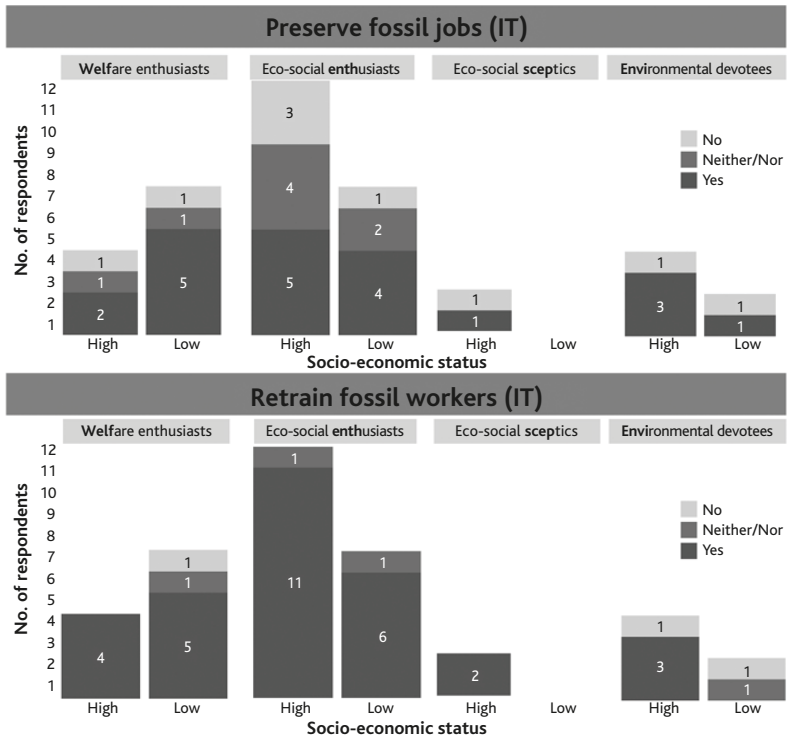


Source: Own data

a lesser degree – job preservation, with the lower socio-economic group being particularly positive about job preservation. SCEPs and ENTHs in Italy and Germany hold comparable opinions. The few SCEPS in the Italian sample show little interest in the two policy options studied; the ENTHs support both, with the lower socio-economic group being more positive about job preservation than the higher one. However, the response patterns of ENVIs in Italy are quite different from those of their German counterparts. ENVIs almost exclusively reject retraining – a green transition measure that we expected to be of interest given their attitudinal predisposition and social vulnerability. By contrast, ENVIs with a higher socio-economic status surprisingly support preserving jobs in fossil fuel industries.

Returning to our first research question, eco-social attitudinal predispositions are – except for the ENVIs in Italy – largely consistent with the positions on specific eco-social policies and trade-off scenarios. However, these positions appear socio-economically structured. To gain better insights into the different attitudes and trade-offs of the focus group participants, we analysed qualitative narratives and reasonings in the focus group discussions.

Figure 9.2: Policy response patterns by attitudinal predisposition and socio-economic status, Italy



Source: Own data

Making sense of survey patterns: the focus group discussions

To better understand whether and how the preferences of the different eco-social attitudinal sub-groups (ENTHs, ENVIs, SCEPs, WELFs; Figures 9.1 and 9.2) might clash in the interaction of climate and social policy issues, we explored how related aspects such as climate change, climate policies, state action, social inequalities and welfare policies were discussed in the focus group discussions. The following paragraphs group these discussions by attitudinal sub-group and socio-economic status.

As demonstrated in the previous section, support for retraining and preserving fossil fuel jobs is comparatively high among the WELFs in Germany and Italy. In line with this survey pattern, both the German and Italian discussions showed that concerns about jobs and economic conditions prevail among participants identified as WELFs when considering eco-social trade-offs. For example, Erik from Germany and Loris from Italy (all names were pseudonymised) share the hope that today's transition-related job loss will turn into a job creator in the future:

Erik (WELF; DE, higher socio-economic group; 56 y, real estate agent):	Of course, jobs will be lost in one sector, which will damage the economy, but we have to use this labour force and use it to go into areas where we can build a future. There will be gaps at first, but in the end, there will be work for everyone again and we will be much better off.
Loris (WELF; IT, lower socio-economic group, 44 y, store clerk):	If we think about an environmental future, when we think about the planet, we must not think about the average citizen today, but of future generations. … If radical measures were taken, they would certainly hit those hardest who have not yet been able to adapt to climate change, who depend on gas and diesel, those who exploit intensive livestock farms and produce meat.

At the same time, WELF's in both countries pointed towards different dimensions of social hardship related to job loss and retraining:

Safira (WELF; DE, higher socio-economic group, 21 y, university student):	If I imagine I'm 50, I've worked in this [fossil] field all my life and suddenly I'm supposed to do something else … I don't think I'd be able to cope with it.
Mario (WELF; IT, lower socio-economic group, 53 y, construction worker):	I think we need to consider today's citizens, too. Specifically, when considering the social impact of climate action, I find there is a social divide. The lower-middle social class is hit harder than the rest [of the population].

These country-specific concerns already point towards different implicit baseline assumptions that underpin certain lines of arguments in our two country cases. While German participants seem to take at least some basic social assistance for granted and are more worried about status loss (like Safira), Italian participants more frequently point towards existential needs or material losses. It was also striking that among German WELFs with a lower socio-economic background, jobs were only a secondary concern. Instead, an overall critique of green transitions as such was expressed and state interventions for the sake of climate policies were criticised sharply by them:

Moderator:	The state could enact retraining and the like to cushion the consequences [of climate mitigation interventions]. What's the supporting argument?
Anita (WELF; DE, lower socio-economic group, 68 y, retired):	It's already intervening far too much!
Florian (WELF; DE, lower socio-economic group, 46 y, waste disposal worker):	It's already a planned economy.
Eva (ENVI; DE, higher socio-economic group, 56 y, clerk in crafts business):	Isn't that self-evident? When I look at nuclear power, which will be history at some point, a lot of people are employed there. They shouldn't be lost. They have to be taken along. I didn't think that was a question, I thought it was a fact.
Moderator:	Is it self-evident that the state should be held responsible?
Eva:	Yes. (several others agree)
Nicole (WELF; DE, lower socio-economic group, 59 y, social security clerk):	The state will then take away my job.

Interestingly, this opposition against and low trust in statutory action was a remarkably clear pattern in Germany. Almost all participants identified as WELFs from the lower socio-economic group tended towards a regressive, anti-science, anti-climate mitigation stance (while for Eva as an ENVI, the transformation was already taken for granted, as her quote illustrates). We interpret this as a form of heightened status anxiety – or status anger – that is not alleviated by measures like retraining guarantees. Even if they are not directly at risk of job loss due to the green transition (being retired, a waste worker and a social security clerk, respectively), Anita, Florian and Nicole perceive themselves as part of a social group that, in their view, can only lose from environmental policies.

When we turn towards the ENVIs, the observed differences between Germany and Italy in the survey responses (Figures 9.1 and 9.2) are also

visible in the group discussions. In Germany, they generally expressed positions similar to the German ENVI Eva in the discussion snippet presented earlier. They frequently put forward arguments for a green transition of the economy with a statutory responsibility for social concerns. Moreover, as Eva's expression 'it's also the state's job to get these people back into suitable work' suggests, German ENVIs might also put environmental over social concerns, as they expect the social ones to be already covered by existing policies.

Findings for the ENVIs from the Italian focus groups indicate that ENVIs strongly support environmental protection. However, they seem to have little hope that society at large or the Italian government in particular would actually live up to the required action:

Teresa (ENVI; IT, higher socio-economic group, 50 y, water purification employee):	It would be right to protect the environment, but comforts [use of oil or air conditioning] are hard to give up.
Alessandra (ENVI; IT higher socio-economic group, 50 y, employee in legal sector):	Companies abroad work for the climate, in Italy they don't. … Companies must invest [in reconversion], it takes money, the state must help them otherwise they do nothing.
Riccardo (ENVI; IT, lower socio-economic group, 24 y, university student):	Now we spend billions every autumn on landslides and floods. Here, billions could be spent on reinvesting in helping those who work with oil.

Environmental devotion here is clearly paired with pragmatism and distrust in governmental capacity, which in our eyes probably fuelled the puzzling survey response pattern of a relatively high share of Italian ENVIs supporting the preservation of fossil fuel jobs.

Looking at the ENTHs' contributions to the focus group discussion, we can make a highly instructive observation: eco-social enthusiasts in both countries discuss questions of environmental protection, jobs, economy and social protection from a relatively integrated perspective. They also express their relative preferences for either environmental or social policy dimensions against the backdrop of how they judge the system they live in (like the German participants Walther and Gert; the former pointing towards economic risks, the latter highlighting the basic social security principle):

Walther (ENTH; DE, higher socio-economic group, 71 y, retired):	If we promote renewable energies, we also need workers. At the moment, there aren't enough skilled workers to

	install enough solar systems on roofs. In other words, we are hindering technical progress!
Eva (ENVI; DE, higher socio-economic group, 56 y, clerk in crafts business):	If the state decides that an industry is dying out, like coal or nuclear power, then it's also the state's job to get these people back into suitable work in some way.
Gert (ENTH; DE, lower socio-economic group, 70 y, pensioner):	After all, we have a Auffanggesellschaft ['rescue society'; refers to social security principle].

Our interpretation is that, if confronted with an eco-social trade-off scenario, German ENTHs might feel comfortable opting for the environmental side if they take the social dimension as taken for granted.

Also, in the Italian focus group discussions, ENTHs discuss social and environmental issues from an integrated perspective:

Saverio (ENTH, IT, lower socio-economic group, 30 y, administrative employee):	You need both: economic growth and stopping carbon emissions. You need to balance the two. … Every single person can contribute to reconcile these two ambitions.
Matteo (ENTH; IT, higher socio-economic group, 22 y, university student):	More than ruining the economy, [climate change] necessarily transforms it.
Emanuela (ENTH; IT lower socio-economic group, 40 y, medical clerk):	Climate interest in Italy damages the economy [… because the state] wants to do everything green …, but in the end, it does not put the citizen in a position to do so.
Giuseppe (ENTH; IT, higher socio-economic group, 64 y, manager in public administration):	The unemployment created by shutting down large companies that pollute, it's clear that the state has to intervene, there's absolutely no doubt, that's its main task.

As we can see, in Italy, the 'embedded reasoning' also clearly applies: particularly from Emanuela's and Giuseppe's statements, it becomes clear that they perceive the state to be responsible for steering integrated social and

environmental policies. However, in contrast to the German interviewees, they do not necessarily have sufficient trust in their government and their social security schemes to address the social concerns, which is why they probably supported job preservation in the survey.

Finally, as we only have very few SCEPs in both countries (participants who are critical towards social and environmental protection), their group discussion patterns are hardly meaningful. Therefore, we refrain from discussing them. However, having only a few participants categorised as SCEPs in our dataset does not mean we did not find scepticism in our group discussion: as already outlined, German WELFs from the lower socio-economic group especially expressed sharp scepticism against climate change, the state and science. Similarly, Italian participants (in particular ENVIs) expressed scepticism about whether the Italian state or society can handle climate mitigation properly.

Conclusions

In this chapter, we analysed data from focus groups in Italy and Germany, including a non-representative survey among the participants and transcripts of focus group discussions to better understand people's perceptions of the interaction of social policies and climate mitigation policies. We departed from findings in the literature that people have different attitudinal predispositions on both environmental and social aspects (ranging from welfare enthusiasts to environmental devotees and eco-social enthusiasts to eco-social sceptics), and we assumed that these might also shape their views on the interaction of the two domains (that is, in a trade-off or an integrated scenario). Our analyses confirmed our expectations regarding how the attitudinal sub-groupings influence people's perceptions of interacting eco-social scenarios: welfare enthusiasts show great concern for social implications when confronted with an eco-social trade-off, and environmental devotees strongly argue in favour of climate measures.

However, as our analyses of the group discussions revealed, people's stances towards social or climate mitigation instruments in a trade-off or an integrated eco-social scenario are also fundamentally shaped by their overall trust in institutions, their perception of state responsibility and capacity (and society's capacity), and to what extent they took existing structures for granted (for example, the welfare system). While the general social and environmental attitudinal predispositions were relatively stable across both countries in shaping people's positions towards eco-social policy scenarios, references to these structural dimensions varied between Italy and Germany (and, to a certain extent, across socio-economic groups). For instance, German welfare enthusiasts from the lower socio-economic group were predominantly extremely negative towards any climate mitigation and expressed very low

trust in the state. In Italy, trust issues rather emerged among environmental devotees (and more among members of the upper socio-economic group). They did not express fundamental distrust in the state but rather doubted governmental capacities to steer climate mitigation. Similarly, while Italian eco-social enthusiasts emphasised the need for a strong state that could deal with environmental and social challenges, Germans from the same attitudinal sub-group seemed to be more comfortable taking the environmental side, as they took the German welfare system and its capacities to buffer social costs to a certain extent for granted.

As we operated with low case numbers and non-representative data, our evidence has little external validity. However, its high internal validity provides a solid ground for future research scaling up our findings. Therefore, we hope these insights will inspire larger, more representative and in-depth mixed-method studies to further explore these dynamics on the societal embeddedness of eco-social policy support.

Note

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