

Old or new lines of conflict? Theorizing the multi-dimensional politics of eco-social policies

Giovanni Amerigo Giuliani (Università di Bologna), Torben Fischer (Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg)

There is an expanding and highly informative literature concerning eco-social policies (e.g., Gough, 2011; 2017; Sabato and Mendelli, 2018; Mendelli et al., 2021). Nevertheless, such a stream of research remains substantially new, theoretically “contested” and empirically still under-explored. The economic-social-environment nexus – and more precisely the social-environment one – is far from being disentangled (Ridley, 2010; Koch, 2018; Gough, 2011; Schweikert et al., 2018; Sabato and Mandelli 2018; Mandelli et al., 2021).

It follows that, up to the present, a theoretical framework to investigate the politics of eco-social policies has not been elaborated yet, nor empirically tested. With this term, we refer to the contentious way(s) in which political actors – political parties, trade unions, employer representatives, social movements, and supranational organizations – compete with each other concerning the eco-social policy issue.

Broadly speaking – as it happens in the other public policy fields – analyzing the politics of eco-social policies implies identifying the dimensions or lines of conflict where such a political contestation is structured and detecting the possible range of policy options that are open to political actors – that is, their possible policy positions. In this regard, during the last few decades, the comparative welfare state literature has developed a wide array of sophisticated theoretical toolkits to explain the political conflict and the resulting actors’ configuration in the social and labor market fields.

It seems fair to state that there is an emerging consensus among scholars that the space of political conflict regarding the welfare state is now multi-dimensional (Esping-Andersen 1999; Taylor-Gooby, 2004; Häusermann, 2010; Bonoli and Natali 2012; Morel et al. 2012; Hemerijck 2013;). As showed by Beramendi et al. (2015), key political choices over questions of political economy are no longer limited to a simple dichotomy – that is pro vs. contra welfare state – but involve combined decisions about both the role of the state in covering social risks and needs (first dimension) and the nature of policy measures to implement (second dimension).

When it comes to eco-social policies, it is not feasible to reproduce automatically this clear-cut, multi-dimensional theoretical framework. Contrary to the long-established,

traditional “welfare state policies” – for which we may rely on an impressive amount of theoretical and empirical research –eco-social policies are a relatively new policy field. Politically speaking, they can be fairly considered still a “niche” issue – that is, a topic that only recently and gradually is entering, if entering at all, the political actor’s policy agenda in the advanced democracies.

It follows that the space of contestation around such a policy field remains unstructured or is being structured.

This article investigates the “emerging” politics of eco-social policies by answering the following research questions:

- To what extent does the politics of eco-social policies differ from the “traditional” politics of social policy? And more specifically:
 - o To what extent do eco-social policies create new dimensions of conflict?
 - o How do political actors position themselves regarding eco-social policies?

The paper is explorative in nature. Therefore, rather than presenting a straightforward theoretical framework, it elaborates on the possible lines of conflict that should be considered to investigate the politics of eco-social policies. The study maintains that the space of political contestation is multidimensional – that is, conflict is expected to take place over five distinct lines. However, the article does not claim that all of these dimensions emerge in all the (national) contexts, nor that they are relevant for all the actors. It, however, offers some theoretical-grounded assumptions, whose validity are then tested empirically focusing on the German case study. In this regard, the article provides some empirical data regarding the line of conflicts emerged in the last national elections in Germany and the resulting actors’ eco-social policy positions.