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ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

Non-State Actor Reactions to the European Green Deal: Implications for Eco-Social Integration

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Correspondence: Julia C. Cremer (julia.cremer@uni-hamburg.de)**Received:** 15 March 2024 | **Revised:** 8 September 2025 | **Accepted:** 11 October 2025**Funding:** This work was supported by Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (513092447).**Keywords:** eco-social integration | Meso-level | multilevel analysis | non-state actors | sentiment analysis

ABSTRACT

In response to the interconnected ecological and social crises, there is growing interest in the integration of climate and social policy, both in academic discourse and in public debate. While the European Union has begun to address both dimensions jointly through the European Green Deal (EGD), it remains institutionally separate at the national level. Non-state actors on both levels are increasingly engaged in debates about the social consequences of climate change and related policies. Drawing on *field theory*, this article conceptualizes the EGD as a field intervention and examines how national-level actors respond to it—specifically, whether these responses signal an emerging *field change*. Using Germany as a case study, the article analyzes a dataset of public communications by non-state actors in the eco-social nexus at both the EU and the national level. A mixed-methods approach combines computer-assisted quantitative text analysis tools such as Structural Topic Modeling and Sentiment Analysis with selective qualitative document analysis. The findings reveal three distinct actor types and their respective strategies: (1) less-equipped challengers, who largely ignore the EGD; (2) well-equipped challengers, who engage with it to advance eco-social demands; and (3) incumbents, who either frame the EGD positively to promote investments in their respective industry or explicitly oppose its objectives. Given the dominance of incumbents' strategies in the debate, combined with their structural advantages, the article concludes that the EGD is unlikely to trigger substantial field change toward national eco-social integration—yet it offers critical discursive opportunities for challengers.

1 | Introduction

The global average temperature in 2024 has already increased by 1.6°C compared to the pre-industrial level (Copernicus Climate Change Service 2025). The associated fundamental and irreversible environmental changes (IPCC 2021), as well as structural changes driven by ecological transformation, profoundly alter the conditions and tasks of the Welfare State (Hirvilammi et al. 2023). Societal and ecological crises are deeply interconnected and mutually reinforcing (Chancel 2022; Galvin 2020; Gough 2013; Hsiang et al. 2019; Rehm et al. 2022; Wiedmann et al. 2020). Since a lack of social security obstructs climate transformation (Green and Healy 2022), an integrated

approach addressing both social and ecological dimensions appears necessary. This integrated approach is conceptualized in the research literature as *Sustainable Welfare* (Hirvilammi and Koch 2020; Koch et al. 2016) and *Eco-Social Policy* (Gough 2017; Hirvilammi et al. 2023; Mandelli 2022), and is increasingly reflected in public and political debates. A deeper understanding of the dynamics of policy integration in this area is essential.

Integrated approaches toward social and ecological goals play a crucial role at the local (Emilsson et al. 2025), the national, and the supranational level (Waltrup et al. 2025). The latter is particular in focus when it comes to the European Green Deal (EGD), which is the European Union's strategy

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to achieve climate neutrality by 2050 through sustainable economic growth and environmental protection (European Commission 2019). Introduced under Ursula von der Leyen's first presidency of the European Commission, the EGD established a framework in which climate and social goals were addressed jointly. Despite reasonable doubts about the extent to which the EGD is able to effectively combat the climate crisis or substantively address poverty and inequality (Gengnagel and Zimmermann 2022; Haas et al. 2022; Ossewaarde and Ossewaarde-Lowtoot 2020; Pianta and Lucchese 2020; Schepelmann 2022), it has been argued that, from an analytical perspective, the EGD can be considered an eco-social policy (Mandelli 2022). This interpretation is based on the relatively high level of integration of ecological and social aspects within the EGD (Cotta 2024; Mandelli et al. 2023; Sabato and Mandelli 2020; Sabato and Theodoropoulou 2022).

Emission reduction strategies, social protection systems, and compensatory mechanisms are implemented at the national level. Here, integrated eco-social approaches face more complex challenges, as governments must translate broad principles—where tensions between goals such as economic growth and climate targets, or distributional consequences remain unsolved—into concrete policies and coordinate between conflicting objectives (Koch 2018). Domorenok and Trein (2024) argue that the existence of well-established policy fields, as well as the absence of boundary-spanning actors, are crucial barriers for eco-social integration in complex modern political systems.

Given the multilevel character of climate policies in general—and of EU policy in particular—the question arises whether developments at the supranational level offer potential to overcome existing barriers to eco-social integration at the national level. Since political actors and interests play a crucial role in shaping public policies and fostering policy integration (Domorenok and Trein 2024, 72), their responses to interventions such as the EGD are highly relevant for the further process of integration.

While existing literature has primarily focused on governmental actors in this context, there is limited knowledge regarding the role non-state actors can play. Non-state actors are involved across different levels in the formulation, implementation, and legitimization of climate policies (di Gregorio et al. 2019; Newell 2000) and are considered central to eco-social transformations more generally (Petschow et al. 2021; Lindellee et al. 2021; Cremer 2024). Their reactions can shape change, for example, by driving, obstructing, or redirecting policies. Hence, analytically focusing on non-state actors' reactions to interventions at the supranational level holds potential to generate valuable insights into eco-social integration and contribute to a broader understanding of policy change.

This article asks how non-state actors react differently to the intervention of the EGD (1) and whether these reactions indicate a field change on the national level (2). To address these questions, it first elaborates on relevant issues in the eco-social nexus for non-state actors at the EU level and then outlines different strategies to refer to these issues on a national level.

In pursuing these questions, the article contributes to the Special Issue by shedding light on the role of non-state actors

in eco-social integration, highlighting how the EGD's multilevel character shapes their strategies and responses.

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 introduces Fligstein and McAdam's *field theory* (Fligstein and McAdam 2012) as a theoretical framework, applies it to the EGD, and derives expectations from previous research on non-state actors in eco-social transformation. Section 3 outlines the case, data, and methodology used for empirical analysis. Section 4 presents the empirical findings, which are then discussed in light of the theoretical considerations in Section 5. Finally, Section 6 concludes.

2 | Theoretical Framework

As Domorenok and Trein (2024) argue, the subsystem structure of political systems produces specialized fields that remain stable due to benefiting structures for powerful actors, whereas boundary-spanning actors are crucial for linking otherwise separated policy arenas. Therefore, two factors are particularly relevant for eco-social integration: the destabilization of well-established field structures, which disrupt reinforcing arrangements, and the presence of boundary-spanning actors. This makes a field theoretical perspective well suited for analyzing such dynamics, especially with a focus on the role of non-state actors. According to Kungl and Hess (2021), this theoretical approach is highly relevant for understanding institutions, power, and agency in sustainability transitions in general.

Building on theorists like Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) or DiMaggio and Powell (1983), in their *Theory of Field*, Fligstein and McAdam (2012) elaborate a meso-level theory that conceptualizes change and stability through socially constructed *Strategic Action Fields* (SAF). In these SAF, individual and collective actors interact with each other. Actors' positions are relative and influence their interpretation of the field, their actions, and other actors' positions. SAFs are characterized by shared substantive rationales and rules of the field, defined forms of action, organizations, and commonly used resources (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 10–11).

For the purposes of this article, and following Cremer (2024), the eco-social field in Germany is conceptualized as young and emerging. It is analytically distinguished from, yet deeply intertwined with, the established fields of environmental, social, and economic policy. Since actors enter the eco-social field from these arenas, their strategies and positions remain strongly rooted in their original field environments. Against this backdrop, three elements of the field theory are particularly relevant for analyzing non-state actors: incumbents, challengers, and field resources (1); the broader field environment (2); and the states of a SAF (3). The following subsections present these elements in detail and apply them to the context of the article.

2.1 | Incumbents, Challengers and Resources

Building on social movement theory (Gamson 1975), field theory distinguishes between *incumbents* and *challengers* within a SAF.¹ Incumbents' interests are strongly reflected in the existing field structure, granting them privileged access to resources.

In contrast, challengers hold limited influence and await opportunities to contest the status quo, improve their position, and expand their access to relevant resources (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 13–16).

Access to resources is particularly relevant in times of field instability. Which types of resources are most relevant in a specific field are context-dependent and may include material (e.g., financial), social, or cultural resources. Typical examples are funding, membership size, access to government, law, knowledge, or social skills (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 172). The degree of organizational institutionalization is assumed to resonate with access to such resources and therefore serves as a useful proxy in this article.

To guide the empirical analysis of this article, a pre-analytical identification and classification of relevant actors is required. Historically, climate policy has been addressed within the fields of environmental policy and, in particular, economic policy. Accordingly, established actors from the economic field—particularly industry and business associations as well as industrial trade unions—are classified as incumbents, based on their substantial resource endowment. These actors, especially the industry and business associations, have been extensively studied as incumbent regime actors that tend to resist ambitious climate policy (R. Brulle 2022; R. J. Brulle 2019; Geels 2014; Vesa et al. 2020). They are characterized by strong access to political decision-making processes and considerable financial resources.

In contrast, several types of non-state actors have been recognized in the literature as potential drivers of eco-social approaches and can be classified as challengers. These include trade unions (Keil and Kreinin 2022; Rätzl et al. 2010; Snell and Fairbrother 2010), environmental NGOs (ENGOS), social movements (Jakopovich 2009; Kalt 2021; Kössler 2013), as well as social NGOs and third sector organizations (Bohnenberger et al. 2021; Petschow et al. 2021). Within this heterogeneous group, a distinction can be made between challengers with stronger and those with weaker institutionalization.

In the field of environmental policy, ENGOS are long-established actors that typically enjoy greater resource access compared to climate justice movement groups. The latter are generally less institutionalized and pursue more radical and transformative agendas (Kössler 2013), making them classic examples of less-equipped challengers. Trade Unions, while generally more institutionalized than social movements, are marked by their heterogeneity, which also applies to their transition strategies (affirmative vs. transformative; see Stevis and Felli 2015). Differences in political orientation and membership base, and sectoral affiliation result in a divide between market-oriented and class-oriented unions (Kalt 2022; Keil and Kreinin 2022), as well as between industrial and service-sector unions (Cremer 2024). From a field-theoretical perspective, sectoral affiliation is highly relevant, as it resonates with differences in the degree of institutionalization and the political consideration—both of which affect resource access. Industrial trade unions have a long tradition of corporative interest representation and are typically well institutionalized, and thus classified as incumbents. In contrast, service sector unions are comparatively younger, less institutionalized, and possess more limited

access to resources, classifying them as challengers. Similarly, third-sector organizations and social NGOs—despite their institutional standing in the field of social policy—have only recently begun to engage with climate issues (Bohnenberger 2023; Bohnenberger et al. 2021; Waltrup et al. 2025). Their limited activity in the ecological domain suggests a weaker resource base in this area justifies their classification as generally well-equipped challengers.

To summarize: In the context of eco-social integration, this article classifies industrial trade unions and industry and business associations as incumbents, whose interests are well represented in the status quo. The category of field challengers is further subdivided into more and less institutionalized challengers. Service-sector trade unions, institutionalized ENGOS, and established social policy organizations are considered relatively well equipped with field-specific resources. In contrast, radical social movements—due to their lower degree of institutionalization and limited access to political and financial resources—are categorized as less equipped challengers.

In a multilevel European context, nationally operating actors are complemented by transnational public interest groups active in emerging policy fields of European integration (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 88; Fligstein and Stone Sweet 2002; Marks and McAdam 1999). This embeddedness in a broader field environment is elaborated in the following.

2.2 | The Broader Field Environment

SAFs are embedded in a *broader field environment* of interrelated SAFs that influence one another. Accordingly, the stability of a field is shaped by its relations to surrounding fields. These interrelations vary in proximity (e.g., climate policy is proximate to the energy field but more distant from education), structure (e.g., labor market policy is structurally dependent on macroeconomic governance), and type (e.g., policy fields are governmental, while arenas such as social media are primarily non-governmental) (Fligstein 2021, 276–277; Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 18–19).

Actors may benefit from the resources of proximate fields to improve their position. Yet such cross-field dependencies also increase their vulnerability to external changes (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 168). Thus, the ability of actors to manage these resource dependencies is more decisive for a field's stability or instability than the sheer number of its interrelations with other fields (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 62).

In the case of the eco-social policy field at the national level, environmental, economic, and social policy can be characterized as proximate fields. They provide resources and institutional logics that shape the eco-social field, with non-state actors entering primarily from these arenas. The environmental field supplies ecological problem definitions, emission reduction targets, and regulatory impetus, while social policy contributes the institutional frameworks for welfare provision and distributional mechanisms. Also, an indirect structural dependency on economic policy exists, as climate policy has thus far been negotiated largely within this domain, and most financial resources are allocated through it. Although these policy fields are primarily governmental in

structure, non-state actors remain highly relevant, particularly for legitimation and implementation.

Finally, due to their embeddedness in the European governance framework and structural dependencies at this level, the corresponding supranational policy fields must also be considered. Depending on how they resonate with national structures, interventions at this level can either stabilize existing structures or trigger field change in the eco-social field, thereby significantly shaping processes of eco-social integration.

2.3 | Field Dynamics

SAFs are dynamic and can exist in phases of emergence, stability, or crisis (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 170–173). Change may occur gradually through incremental positional shifts over time (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 96–99) or result from so-called ‘exogenous shocks’, such as external events in proximate fields or transformative legal interventions through.

In modern political systems, policy fields are typically shaped by external legal and institutional conditions. In the eco-social field, regulatory frameworks, welfare provisions, and funding schemes define the opportunities and constraints for non-state actors. Interventions in these conditions can fundamentally reshape the field: while they often reinforce established (industrial) actors—for example, through sectoral subsidies—such interventions may also create new resources or forms of legitimization that challengers can mobilize to advance innovative action and strategic repositioning (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 18–19; Zimmermann 2019, 35). Such disruptions may generate uncertainty, acting either as a *threat* or an *opportunity* for actors to change the rules, redistribute resources, and potentially improve their positions within the field (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 19–21).

Although the EGD is not entirely exogenous—being itself a product of field developments—it nonetheless represents a profound intervention capable of transforming prevailing logics of economic value creation (Domorenok and Graziano 2023; Schunz 2022). From a field-theoretical perspective, the EGD can therefore be seen as an external event in a proximate field that gives rise to transformative legal interventions in national policy fields. As such, the EGD would induce a high degree of field destabilization and can function either as an opportunity or a threat for non-state actors.

To understand how actors respond to interventions and whether this indicates field change, the theoretical considerations of this section lead to four expectations regarding the strategic actions of incumbents and challengers, based on their access to field-relevant resources:

1. **Incumbents**—namely industrial trade unions, industry and business associations—perceive external events such as the EGD either as a **threat**, if they introduce significant uncertainty regarding their position, or as an **opportunity** to strengthen their position and expand their access to resources. In both cases, incumbents are likely to deploy their existing resources to stabilize and secure their field position.

2. **Institutionalized challengers**—namely ENGOs, SNGOs and trade unions from the service sector—refer to external events like the EGD as **opportunities** to improve their position within the field and promote their interests.
3. For challengers more broadly, strategic reactions depend on the transformative potential of the external event and its implications for the distribution of field resources.
4. While the EGD promotes an integrated eco-social approach, the dominance of incumbents, their privileged resource access and the reinforcing influence of governmental units suggest that its implementation may further consolidate incumbent interests rather than disrupt them.

To address the research question and empirically test these expectations, the next section outlines the data and methodological approach of the analysis.

3 | Case Selection, Data, and Methodological Approach

This section outlines the criteria for case selection, presents the data sources and actor categorization, and details the two-stage mixed methods approach employed for the multilevel empirical analysis.

3.1 | Case Selection and Context

Germany is selected as the national case study, as it constitutes a critical case for understanding eco-social integration, offering both enabling and constraining factors. As the EU's largest economy, Germany is characterized by a strong industrial base with an export-oriented growth model highly dependent on material extraction and fossil fuels. At the same time, its political system rests on a corporatist tradition of coordination between state, economic, and social actors (Finkeldey et al. 2024; Hall and Soskice 2001; Kritikos et al. 2018), granting organized interest groups a particularly important role in shaping public policy (Hatch 2007; Hoppe 2010; Hoppe and Wesselink 2014). As a corporatist welfare regime, Germany is further characterized by status-preserving social insurance schemes for insiders, relatively weak protection for outsiders, and strong church-shaped familialist elements (Esping-Andersen 1990, 30–35; Zimmermann and Graziano 2020). Reflecting this constellation, Germany performs well on employment and social indicators but shows comparatively weak ecological performance (Zimmermann and Graziano 2020).

Politically, climate policy has high salience in parliament and society, with its historical origins in an active environmental movement in the 1980s. Germany initially played a pioneering role, most notably through the Renewable Energy Act (“Erneuerbare-Energien-Gesetz”) in the early 2000s. Subsequent measures, such as the Climate Protection Act (“Bundes-Klimaschutzgesetz”) from 2019, which legally defines the target of net greenhouse gas neutrality by 2046, and the Energy Efficiency Strategy (“Energieeffizienzstrategie”), underline this ambition. However, persistent ambition and implementation gaps undermine the effectiveness (Sachverständigenrat

für Umweltfragen 2020), as Germany continues to exceed its emissions targets, particularly in transport and buildings (Harthan and Förster 2024; Hustedt 2013; Michaelowa 2008).

During the legislative period of the “traffic light” coalition (2021–2024), the Social Democrats, the Green Party, and the Liberals, as governing parties, explicitly committed themselves to implement a “social-ecological market economy” (SPD et al. 2021). The proposal of a climate bonus (“Klimageld”) as the first compensation mechanism for the social consequences of climate policy measures illustrates the integration of ecological and social concerns. Furthermore, the heated debates surrounding the “Heizungsgesetz” highlighted the increasing politicization of the social dimension of climate policy during that period (Finkeldey et al. 2024). Taken together, these dynamics suggest a favorable but contested environment for eco-social integration, shaped by persistent structural tensions and political conflicts.

The national dynamics unfold within the supranational context of the European Union. At this European level, the EGD constitutes the overarching strategy to achieve climate neutrality by 2050, with an interim target of reducing greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030, operationalized through the “Fit for 55”-package. As such, it serves as a comprehensive framework for transforming key economic sectors and aims to mobilize both public and private investments toward climate-compatible pathways. As part of the EGD, the implementation of the Social Climate Fund is intended to mitigate the social impacts of this transition for vulnerable groups. By placing climate and sustainability objectives at the core of its economic growth model, the EGD represents an intervention into existing policy approaches (European Commission 2019).

Since the EGD was introduced in 2019, public debates surrounding its launch are particularly relevant for analyzing the dynamics of this intervention in the context of eco-social integration at the national level. The year 2018 serves as a suitable starting point for the analysis, as it marked the emergence of the *FridaysForFuture* movement, which significantly raised the global salience of the climate crisis. Simultaneously, the *Gilets Jaunes* protests in France highlighted the critical intersection of climate and social policy. The dataset, collected in 2023, therefore spans the period from 2018 to 2022. During this time, non-state actors have actively engaged in debates on the social consequences of climate change and ecological transformation at both the European and the German level (Cremer and Bohnenberger 2024; Zimmermann and Gengnagel 2023).

3.2 | Data

To address the research questions empirically, I use data on public communications—specifically press releases—issued by non-state actors at both the European and national levels. Press releases serve as a valuable proxy for actors’ positions, as they allow organizations to directly communicate with their audiences and strategically frame issues in their interest without mediating influence by the media (Lehman-Wilzig 2012; Walters and Walters 1992). They can thus reveal how actors seek to position themselves publicly, signal preferences to others, and attempt to shape policy debates in their interest (Degregorio 2009;

Riker 1996). While they omit other strategies such as informal negotiations or use other ways of communication and mobilization (Baumgartner and Leech 1998; Berry 2010), they are not subject to external fact-checking. Accordingly, press releases should be understood as evidence of discursive positioning and strategic signaling, rather than as comprehensive accounts of organizational strategies. In reflecting actors’ self-presentation, they provide important insights into discursive struggles that shape field dynamics. Hence, these communicative patterns signal broader realignments and may foreshadow field change.

Drawing on data from distinct research projects, two datasets are employed: one capturing press releases at the EU level and the other at the national level. Both datasets encompass a diverse range of non-state actors, including trade unions, social actors, environmental non-governmental organizations, industry and economic associations, and social movements.

The sample of actors was constructed to include the most prominent representatives of each organizational type, with the aim of capturing a heterogeneous set of prominent actors’ positions. To categorize the non-state actors into the three predefined categories—incumbents, well-equipped challengers, and less-equipped challengers—data were collected on several characteristics reflecting resource endowment, including founding year, access to policymakers, memberships, and financial resources. A summary of these characteristics and the categorization is presented in Table 1.

The press release datasets encompass public communication that explicitly addresses the intersection of climate and social issues. This was ensured by including press releases from environmental actors engaging with social themes, social actors addressing environmental and climate concerns, and economic actors addressing both dimensions. The final datasets include 24 actors and a total of 1499 texts at the German level and 22 actors with 1221 texts at the European level. Most of the selected actors are active on both levels.

3.3 | Methodological Approach

It is important to note that the contributions of individual actors to the text corpus vary considerably, as illustrated in Figure 1. This variation is influenced both by the number of press releases and by their respective lengths. While such disparities could be interpreted as a distortion of the dataset, they also serve as indicators of the capacities and levels of engagement of the actors authoring the press releases, thus reflecting their position within the field. For this reason, mathematical weighting or normalization—based on the number or length of texts—was not applied.

To analyze the empirical data, a two-stage mixed methods approach was employed.

3.3.1 | First Stage—Topic Modeling of EU-Level Data

In the first stage, I used the quantitative text analysis method of *Structural Topic Modeling* (STM), as outlined by Roberts et al. (2019), applied to the European-level dataset. This method

TABLE 1 | Categorization of organizations.

Organization	Type and sector	Founding year	Fulltime equivalent of lobbyists (year)	Categorization
Arbeiterwohlfahrt (AWO)	Social/welfare NGO	1919	7.14 (2024)	Challenger, well-equipped
Sozialverband VdK	Social/welfare NGO	1950	3.5 (2024)	Challenger, well-equipped
Paritätischer Wohlfahrtsverband	Social/welfare NGO	1924	7.28 (2023)	Challenger, well-equipped
Deutscher Caritasverband (Caritas)	Social/welfare NGO (church)	1897	16.47 (2023)	Challenger, well-equipped
Sozialverband Deutschland (SoVD)	Social/welfare NGO	1917	0.25 (2024)	Challenger, well-equipped
Diakonie	Social/welfare NGO (church)	1848	1.5 (2023)	Challenger, well-equipped
Friends of the Earth Germany (BUND)	Environmental NGO	1975	5.56 (2024)	Challenger, well-equipped
Greenpeace	Environmental NGO	1971	4.7 (2023)	Challenger, well-equipped
Deutsche Umwelthilfe	Environmental NGO	1975	0.87 (2024)	Challenger, well-equipped
Naturschutzbund (NABU)	Environmental NGO	1899	13.45 (2024)	Challenger, well-equipped
WWF Deutschland	Environmental NGO	1961	24 (2024)	Challenger, well-equipped
Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund (DGB)	Trade union (umbrella)	1949	No entry	Challenger, well-equipped
IG Metall	Trade union (industry)	1949	No entry	Incumbent
Vereinte Dienstleistungsgewerkschaft (ver.Di)	Trade union (service sector)	2001	No entry	Challenger, well-equipped
IGBCE	Trade union (chemical industry)	1997	No entry	Incumbent
IG Bauen-Agrar-Umwelt (IG BAU)	Trade union (construction sector)	1996	No entry	Incumbent
Eisenbahn- und Verkehrsgewerkschaft (EVG)	Trade union (railway sector)	2010	No entry	Challenger, well-equipped
Fridays for Future (FFF)	Movement (climate justice)	2018	No entry	Challenger, less-equipped
Extinction Rebellion	Movement (climate justice)	2018	No entry	Challenger, less-equipped
Ende Gelände	Movement (climate justice)	2015	No entry	Challenger, less-equipped
Attac	Movement (globalization critique)	1998	0 (2023)	Challenger, less-equipped
Verband der Chemischen Industrie (VCI)	Chemical industry association	1877	27.94 (2024)	Incumbent
Bundesverband der deutschen Industrie (BDI)	Industry association	1949	43.39 (2024)	Incumbent
Verband der Automobilindustrie (VDA)	Automotive industry association	1901	24.05 (2024)	Incumbent

Note: Founding year as a proxy for the degree of institutionalization, full-time equivalent of lobbyists as a proxy for policy access, *Data based on voluntary disclosures in the Transparency Register of the German Bundestag.

enables the identification of dominant thematic structures in the actors' public communication.

The text corpus was pre-processed by removing numbers, symbols, punctuation, URLs, stopwords, and frequent names. Words were reduced to their stems, and the corpus

was trimmed by excluding words that appeared in more than 99% or fewer than 1% of the documents. To determine the optimal number of topics, a series of models were estimated (see Appendix A). Based on the maximization of the Average Semantic Coherence and Exclusivity Scores,² a STM with nine topics was selected. These topics were then manually labeled

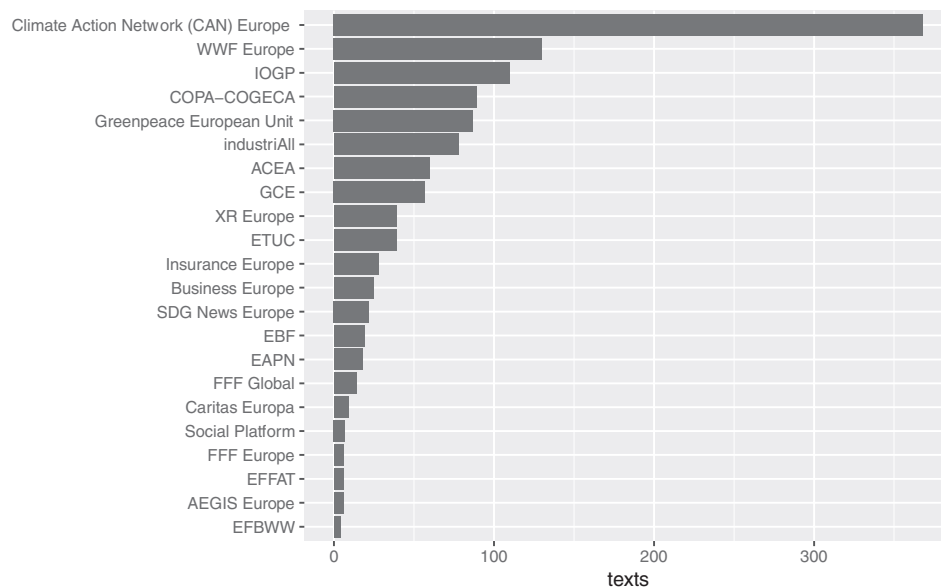
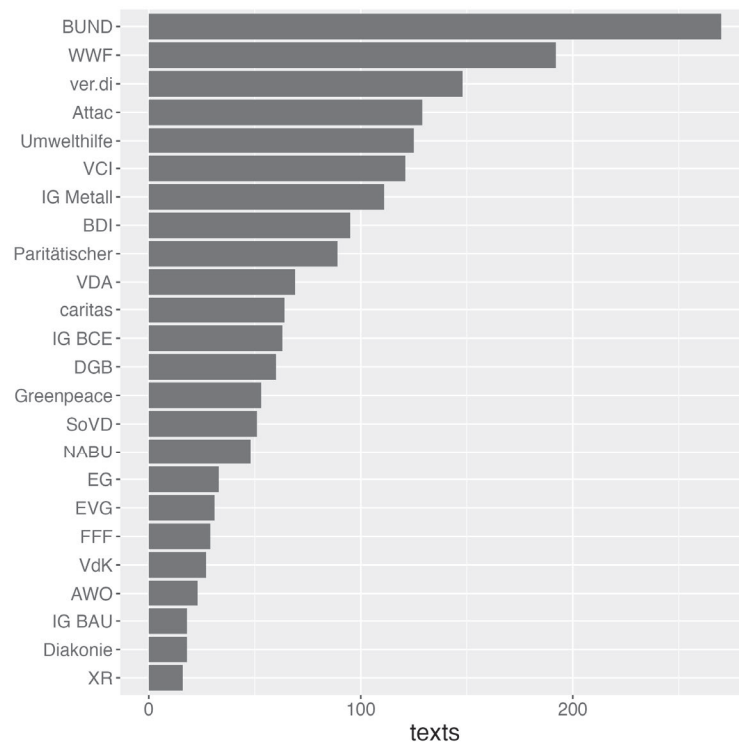


FIGURE 1 | Dataset. The number of texts by individual actors contained in the overall corpus. Top: Germany. Bottom: EU.

using their most frequent words (see Appendix B) and their FREX metric (a weighted harmonic mean of a word's rank in exclusivity and frequency).

3.3.2 | Second Stage—Sentiment and Qualitative Analysis of National-Level Data

The second stage focuses on the national-level dataset. The same pre-processing steps as in the first stage were applied, with the exception that trimming the corpus and stemming the words were omitted, as these are not suitable for the following analytical techniques.

First, text mining techniques from the *quanteda* package in R (Benoit et al. 2018) were employed to assess the prominence and usage of the topics identified in the first stage in the national-level corpus.

Second, a *keyword-in-context* (KWIC) analysis was conducted to extract windows of 20 words surrounding relevant keywords. These text segments were then analyzed using sentiment analysis. This method evaluates the emotional valence of texts—whether they induce positive or negative emotions—based on a predefined dictionary. The Dictionary of Rauh (2018), specifically developed for the analysis of German political language, was selected due to its suitability

for examining the communicative strategies of political and societal actors.

Third, sentiment scores of the KWIC windows were compared to the sentiment scores of the overall corpus to identify potential shifts in tone. Finally, to triangulate the quantitative findings and to provide deeper contextual insights, a qualitative analysis was conducted on selected documents, focusing on the previously identified keywords.

Based on this methodological framework, the next section presents the empirical findings and highlights the main patterns observed in the data.

4 | Empirical Findings

Following the methodological approach outlined in the previous section, the first part of this section presents the findings from the Structural Topic Modeling (STM) of the European-level data. The second part focuses on the results of the sentiment analysis and the qualitative analysis conducted at the German level.

4.1 | First Stage—The European Level

Based on the estimation of a STM with nine topics and their manual labeling, I identified the following salient themes at the European level: climate fund, taxonomy, activist, renewable energy, social protection, agriculture, industry and just transition, LULUCF (land use, land-use change, and forestry), and fossil fuels (see Appendix B). Four of these topics directly address specific policy instruments introduced, revised, or planned under the framework of the EGD: the Social Climate Fund, the EU Taxonomy for Sustainable Activities, the Just Transition Fund, and the Regulation on Land use, Forestry and Agriculture (LULUCF). The topics on the Social Climate Fund and the EU Taxonomy account for a particularly large share of the total corpus. The prominence of sub-concepts and instruments of the EGD indicates that the debate at the EU level is largely shaped by the EGD's concrete elements. The identification of these topics serves as a starting point for the analysis of whether and how national-level actors refer to the European developments. To this end, the keywords associated with these topics are employed in the subsequent keyword-in-context analysis.

4.2 | Second Stage—The German Level

In contrast to the European level, where specific instruments of the EGD prominently shape the debate, references to these elements appear relatively infrequently in the national-level debate. Within the entire German corpus, only 19 mentions³ of the Social Climate Fund, 25 of the EU Taxonomy, 21 of the Just Transition (mechanism), and 4 of the LULUCF-Regulation were identified. By contrast, the underlying frameworks of these instruments are referenced more frequently: the EGD itself is mentioned 111 times and the “Fit for 55”-package 43 times. Based on these findings, I focus in the subsequent

analysis on these underlying concepts rather than on the specific instruments.

The sentiment analysis reveals that sentiments surrounding the EU's underlying policy frameworks—the EGD and the “Fit for 55”-package (hereafter subsumed under EGD)—tend to be more positive than those expressed in the overall corpus related to ecological and social issues in general (see Figure 2). This suggests a general tendency among non-state actors to refer to the EGD as an intervention in a predominantly positive manner. Sentiment scores generally exhibit a bias toward positive expressions, which is particularly pronounced when using Rauh's dictionary (Rauh 2018). Therefore, the values should be interpreted in relative rather than absolute terms.

The analysis of sentiment scores disaggregated by the theoretically predefined actor typology—incumbents, well-equipped challengers, and less-equipped challengers—reveals a clear differentiation between these categories. As illustrated on the left side of Figure 3, incumbents express significantly more positive sentiments in their public communication, whereas less-equipped challengers exhibit comparatively lower sentiment scores, with well-equipped challengers situated in between. This suggests that more positive sentiment usage may correspond with a better position within the field.

The sentiment analysis of the 20-word windows surrounding the EGD, disaggregated by actor typology, shows the same pattern. As shown on the right side of Figure 3, the positive shift in sentiment surrounding the EGD and “Fit for 55”-package (as identified in Figure 2) is primarily driven by incumbent actors. In contrast, challengers show a more negative tone toward these EU-level policy frameworks when compared to the overall corpus. Since the subcategory of less-equipped challengers—except for one actor (*Attac*)—does not refer to the EGD and is thus absent from the debate, all challengers are subsumed into a single category for this part of the analysis.

A further disaggregation of the sentiment to the individual actors reveals some deviations from the general tendencies (Figure 4, left). Among the less-equipped challengers, the organization *Attac* has a comparatively more positive sentiment score than the other actors within this category. This may be attributed to its relatively long-standing presence and its established role within civil society, particularly through its roots in globalization critique, which affords it a somewhat stronger institutional position, despite its categorization. Within the category of well-equipped challengers, the umbrella organization of German trade unions (*Deutscher Gewerkschaftsbund, DGB*) stands out with a notably more positive sentiment score than the rest of this category. Among the incumbents, the trade union of the construction sector *IG BAU* shows a relatively low sentiment score, whereas the German association of the automotive industry (*Verband der Automobilindustrie, VDA*) is characterized by a distinctly positive sentiment score.

Interestingly, as shown on the right side of Figure 4, the sentiment analysis of the 20-word windows surrounding the EGD reveals that only a subset of the actors under consideration—62.5% refer to the EGD at all. Among the less-equipped challengers, *Attac* again represents an exception, being the only actor in this

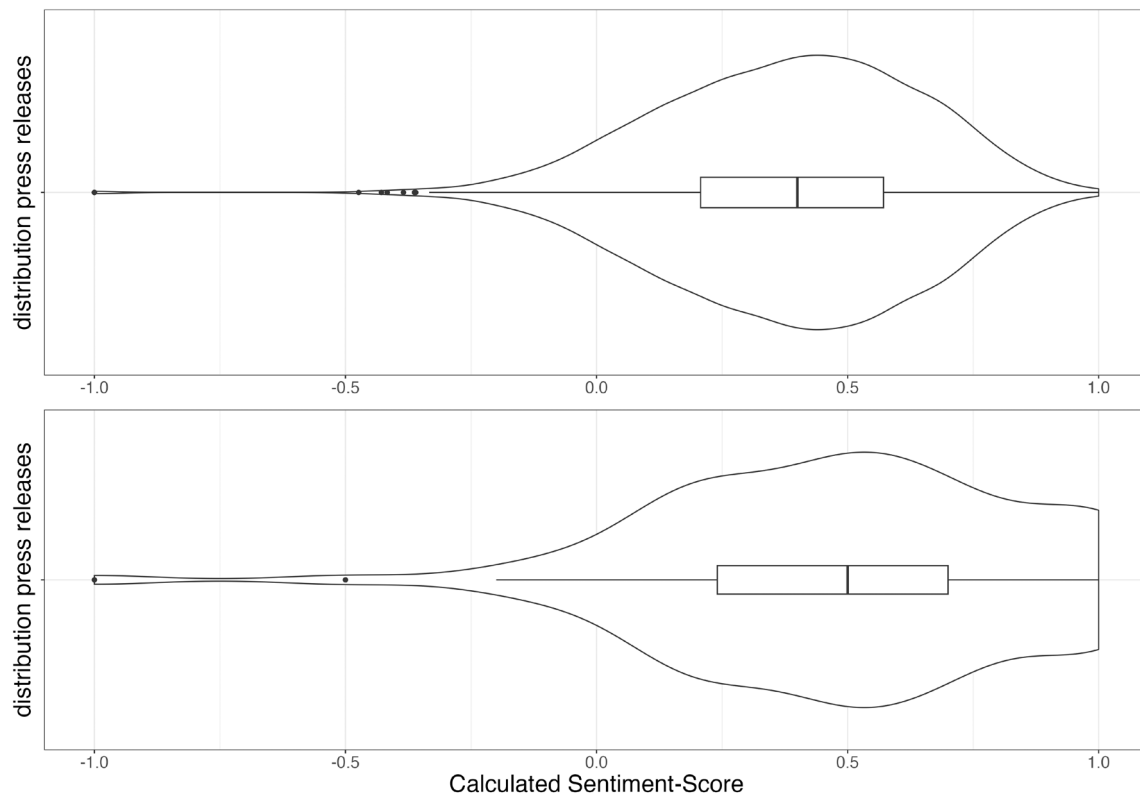


FIGURE 2 | Sentiments in the German-level corpus. Top: The distribution of words based on their calculated sentiment scores (–1, 1) for the overall corpus. Bottom: Distribution of words based on their calculated sentiment scores for 20-word windows around EGD and FF55.

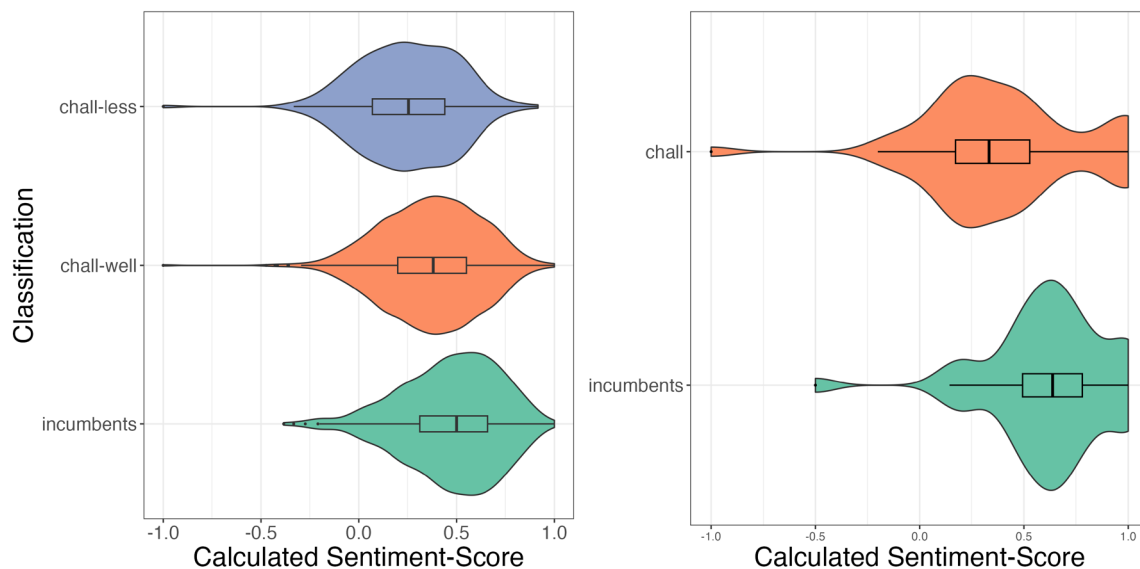


FIGURE 3 | Sentiments for actor types (German level). Word distributions for calculated sentiment scores (–1, 1). Left: General corpus. Right: 20-word windows around EGD and FF55.

category to reference the European level. Its sentiment shows neither a distinctly positive nor negative shift, although it tends to lean toward the relatively negative. Within the category of well-equipped challengers, distinct patterns emerge: *Caritas*, an internationally active church-based welfare organization, and *EVG*, a railway union, draw on the EGD and exhibit a negative sentiment shift. Other actors in this category show more moderate tendencies. The environmental NGOs *Greenpeace* and

Friends of the Earth Germany (BUND), as well as *ver.di*, a service sector union, reference the EGD, with a sentiment that is more negative compared to the overall corpus. In contrast, *WWF*, an environmental NGO operating industry-oriented, expresses the most positive sentiment score toward the EGD within the category. Among the incumbents, all actors that refer to the EGD exhibit a positive sentiment shift. Notably, the Association of German Industries (*Bundesverband der Deutschen Industrie*,

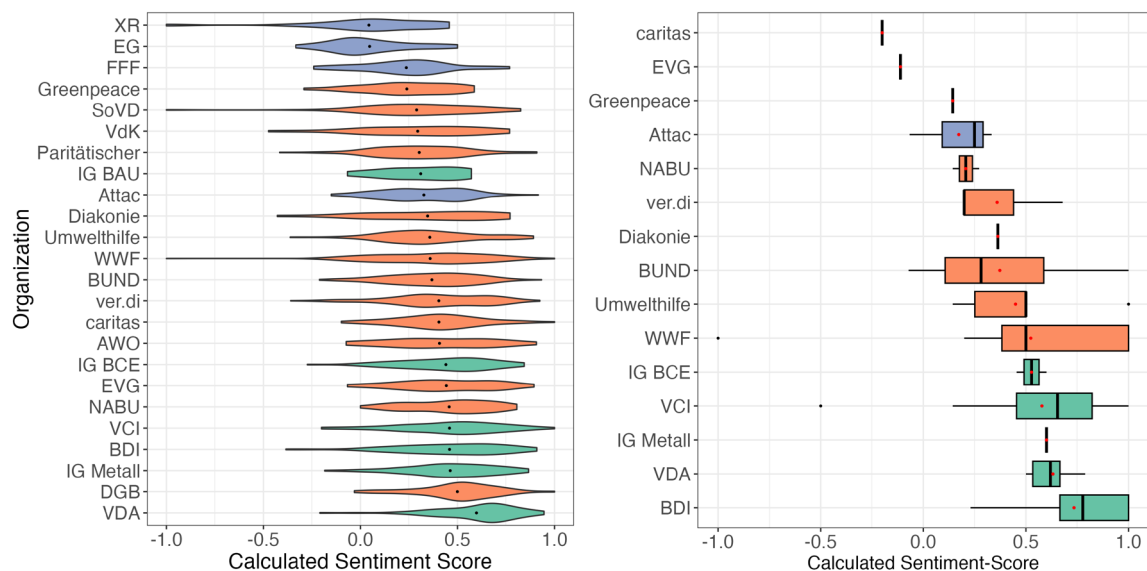


FIGURE 4 | Calculated sentiment scores for individual actors (German-level). Left: General Corpus, black dots are Averages. Right: 20-word windows around EGD and FF55, red dots are averages. Black dots are outliers.

BDI) stands out with the most pronounced positive sentiment shift.

The differentiated sentiment patterns observed at the actor level point to the necessity of a more nuanced document analysis of the underlying argumentative strategies. To address this, a qualitative examination systematically screened all 77 press releases that directly refer to the EGD for recurring argumentative patterns.

In the qualitative analysis, it becomes evident that several incumbents—specifically the Association of German Industries (*BDI*), the German Association of the Automotive Industry (*VDA*), and the industrial trade unions *IG BCE* and *IG Metall*—endorse the EGD as an opportunity to promote economic growth through targeted industrial investments in their respective sectors:

Europe needs this competition of innovations and an active industrial policy to achieve climate targets while simultaneously securing growth and employment.” (*VDA*, 26.01.2021, translation by author)

The Green Deal must contribute to growth; its core focus should be the promotion of growth. This includes building renovation, investments in smart and sustainable mobility, and low-cost renewable energy. (*BDI*, 26.05.2020, translation by author)

At this point, a distinction between industrial trade unions and industrial associations can be observed: while the former primarily direct their political demands toward the German federal government, the latter address the European Commission directly:

The German industry appeals to Commission President Ursula von der Leyen to promptly present

a modern EU industrial strategy. The announced climate, environmental, and digital policy initiatives of her first 100 days in office must prioritize strengthening industry in Europe. (*BDI*, 27.11.2019, translation by author)

The federal states and a new federal government are therefore called upon to make their voices heard in Brussels to ensure that the Green Deal incorporates an industrial policy perspective. (*IG Metall*, 8.10.2021, translation by author)

In a clear divergence to the affirmative stance taken by the other industrial incumbents, the German Chemical Industry Association (*Verband der chemischen Industrie, VCI*) problematizes the EGD and fundamentally questions both its regulatory approach and the underlying climate policy goals. While the other incumbents frame the EGD as an opportunity to better their resource allocation through industrial investments, the *VCI* expresses explicit skepticism toward the EU’s climate agenda.

Instead of dirigisme and prohibitions, such as those characterizing the EU’s ‘Green Deal’, politics should promote a ‘Sustainable Future Deal’ that acknowledges and embraces the potential of entrepreneurial spirit and scientific curiosity.” (*VCI*, 13.05.2020, translation by author)

The *VCI* instead advocates dismantling climate policy boundaries by pushing the EU toward a global price for CO₂. (*VCI*, 16.12.2020, translation by author)

Among the challengers,⁴ the church-based social NGOs *Caritas* and *Diakonie* emphasize the EGD positively in their public

communication. They frame the EGD as an opportunity to reduce poverty and advocate for a stronger social dimension in the implementation of climate policy measures:

As Diakonie Germany, we explicitly welcome the European Social Climate Fund proposed by the European Commission, which is intended to ensure a just implementation of the European Green Deal. However, the plans must lead to real relief for socially disadvantaged people. The most vulnerable in society must not be further burdened by the consequences of climate change. (*Diakonie*, 18.10.2021, translation by author)

The service sector trade union *ver.di* as well as the environmental NGOs *BUND* and *Greenpeace* also refer positively to the EGD, using it as a normative reference and blueprint for integrating ecological and social dimensions at the national level. They advocate for alignment of national policies with the EU-level:

To meet the climate targets of the EU's Green Deal, significant efforts are required. Workers in the energy sector have already contributed through the expansion of renewables and the ongoing coal phase-out. Only a socio-ecological transformation across all sectors, namely transport, buildings, industry, and agriculture, will allow us to meet these goals. This is only possible with decent jobs and good training. (*ver.di*, 01.03.2021, translation by author)

The current reform draft must be scrapped. It is incompatible with both the Green Deal and the Paris Climate Agreement. (*Greenpeace* on the agricultural policy reform plans, 28.05.2020, translation by author)

We need a Green Deal for Germany that provides social protection, creates new jobs in times of crisis, and paves the way for a climate-friendly future through strong regional cycles. (*BUND*, 23.03.2020, translation by author)

Interestingly, the *BUND* employs differentiated argumentative strategies depending on the governance level: while it refers to the EGD as a positive reference point in the national context, it simultaneously criticizes its shortcomings at the EU level:

However, the EU Commission falls far short of what is necessary and does not dare to increase the 2030 emissions reduction target to at least 65 percent. (*BUND*, 11.12.2019, translation by author)

In sum, the empirical analysis shows that while the EU-level debate is shaped by specific instruments of the EGD's,

national-level non-state actors tend to refer more generally to the broader concept. Across actor types, systematic variation emerges in how the EGD is interpreted and used. Incumbents express the most positive sentiments, with the majority framing the EGD as an opportunity for economic growth and industrial investment in their respective sectors. Well-equipped challengers adopt more moderate tones, with internal variation; some explicitly endorse the EGD as a reference point for eco-social transformation at the national level. Less-equipped challengers are largely absent from the discourse surrounding the EGD, which calls into question its potential to drive deeper field change. Overall, the EGD is used as a central point of reference, but its interpretation varies significantly according to actors' field positions.

The following discussion section reflects on the implications of these findings for eco-social integration at the national level and the role of non-state actors in this process.

5 | Discussion

Based on the empirical findings, the EGD can be interpreted as an intervention into an eco-social field in Germany. Whereas actors at the EU level engage with concrete policy instruments of the EGD, actors at the member-state level tend to refer rather to its broader concepts. On the one hand, this difference can be explained by the complexity and technocratic character of specific instruments, which are less likely to resonate with the broader public. On the other hand, broader concepts offer greater opportunities for strategic agenda-setting and for coalition-building, as they allow non-state actors to discuss larger debates in their own narratives and interests (Domorenok and Graziano 2023; McBeth et al. 2007; Shanahan et al. 2013).

Against the backdrop of the research-guiding expectations outlined in Section 2, four key aspects emerge from the analysis of non-state actors' responses to the EGD at the national level. These are discussed in detail below: Challengers tend to evoke more negative, while incumbents evoke more positive emotions in their public communication (1); whether and how challengers refer to the EGD depends, among other factors, on their degree of institutionalization (2); some of the more institutionalized challengers draw on the EGD as a chance to strengthen eco-social interests (3); incumbents use the EGD intensively in their communication strategies—either by using it as an opportunity to promote their sectoral interests or by portraying it as a threat to resist its implementation (4).

1. The tendency of challengers to use relatively more negative sentiments, while incumbents express predominantly positive sentiments in the eco-social nexus, can be understood in light of the broader context of ecological and social crises. As noted in the introduction, the 1.5°C threshold of the Paris Agreement has already been exceeded, marking a departure from a climatic-safe state for human societies. Drawing attention to this critical development is a common communicative strategy among challengers and results in the use of more negative language. In addition, the absence of a shared and positive vision for a

socially just and ecologically sustainable future (Cremer and Bohnenberger 2024) may contribute to this tendency among challengers.

In contrast, incumbent actors currently benefit from the maintenance of the status quo, which is reflected in their predominantly positive language. Although they have fewer incentives to support far-reaching structural change, scientific evidence shows that continuing existing socio-economic trajectories while achieving substantial reductions in CO₂ emissions and resource consumption—so-called absolute decoupling—is not feasible to the extent required (Haberl et al. 2020). The extensive use of positive language by incumbents can thus be interpreted as a discursive strategy to delay transformation (Lamb et al. 2020), reduce uncertainty associated with change and stabilize incumbents' position within the field. This observation supports the second part of Expectation 1, namely that incumbents are likely to deploy their existing resources to stabilize and secure their field position.

2. The empirical findings indicate that less institutionalized challengers—such as groups from the climate justice movement—do not respond to the EGD in their public communication. This absence can be attributed either to their lower level of institutionalization and professionalization, which due to limited resources (e.g., financial, personnel or knowledge), constrains their capacity to engage with political developments at the international level. Another explanation is that press releases are not their preferred mode of communication. Instead, these actors tend to rely more on protest actions, social media campaigns, or other forms of mobilization to articulate their positions and reach their audiences. This reliance on alternative channels renders them less visible within institutionalized arenas, thereby limiting their ability to use the EGD as a resource for strengthening their position in the field. As a result, the EGD does not function as a political opportunity or strategic resource to promote eco-social interests, since it does not provide resource potential aligned with their agendas. Referring to Expectation 3—that strategic reactions of challengers depend on the transformative potential of external events and their implications for field resource distribution—another explanation for their silence may lie in their perception that the EGD lacks transformative potential or does not promise a field shift in their favor.

By contrast, the differentiated reactions of more institutionalized challenger organizations—such as service sector trade unions, environmental NGOs, and (internationally active) social NGOs—underscore their crucial role in advancing eco-social integration at the national level. While some emphasize the shortcomings of the EGD, the majority use it as a discursive entry point to promote eco-social demands nationally and thus as an opportunity to better their field position. This provides support for Expectation 2, namely that institutionalized challengers draw on external events as opportunities to improve their position within the field and advance their interests. Notably, these references do not necessarily involve uniformly positive language, but rather demonstrate strategic engagement. By explicitly articulating an eco-social perspective and

presenting the EGD as a reference point for integrated policy development, they emerge as the principal drivers of eco-social integration in the national discourse. As such, they are critical for realizing the EGD's potential beyond economic-industrial goals.

3. Interestingly, the strategic approaches outlined above are not mutually exclusive, as illustrated by the example of *Friends of the Earth Germany (BUND)*. This actor exemplifies a nuanced use of the EGD: while critically pointing to its insufficiencies at the EU level, *BUND* simultaneously invokes it as a normative and political reference point to advance eco-social integration at the national level. This indicates a strategic engagement with the EGD as an opportunity to strengthen its position within the national field while advocating for integrated policies, thereby providing further support for Expectation 2.

Although the EGD may fall short of required systematic change to adequately address the climate and social crises, it does represent an instance of institutionalized integration of eco-social policies—most prominently through the Social Climate Fund (see Mandelli et al. 2023). In this regard, the European level appears more advanced than the national level in integrating ecological and social dimensions. For social NGOs, this creates an opportunity to position their interests not only in national but also within the European policy arena. However, this opportunity is primarily utilized by internationally active SNGOs. In contrast, SNGOs that primarily operate at the national level have, thus far, not used the EGD to expand their field resources. This can be explained by a lack of organizational capacities (see point 2), by their predominant focus on protective social policy, which tends to be nationally anchored (see Zimmermann and Gengnagel 2023), and/or by their perception that the EGD does not offer transformative potential for advancing their interests. This reasoning aligns with Expectation 3.

4. In line with Expectation 1, incumbent actors, as primary beneficiaries of the existing status quo, operate under supportive conditions and have privileged access to material and institutional resources, including access to the policymaking processes. These structural advantages enable them to strategically respond when external interventions, such as the EGD, pose potential to change the existing field configuration. In such situations, incumbents can strategically mobilize their resources to reduce uncertainty and consolidate or even better their field position. The EGD, by introducing new investment opportunities, is thus used by these actors as an opportunity to secure additional resources. Their presentation of the EGD in positive terms, particularly their highlighting of its potential for economic growth and industrial investments can be interpreted as evidence of this strategy.

This pattern is especially visible among most industry associations and the industry-aligned trade unions, which, despite representing labor interests, share an investment- and growth-oriented interpretation of the EGD. This interpretation stands in clear contrast to the eco-social orientation of the EGD that is emphasized by many challenger actors (see point 2). This suggests that actors with structurally

advantageous positions are more likely to undermine the EGD's potential for eco-social integration by prioritizing short-term sectoral or economic interests over long-term sustainability.

At the same time, the field-destabilizing potential of the EGD, and the uncertainty it generates, becomes particularly visible in the defensive stance of incumbents such as the Chemical Industry Association (*VCI*), which explicitly opposes the EGD's regulatory ambitions and its objectives in general. This case illustrates that incumbents may not only attempt to co-opt policy change in their favor but also engage in open obstruction when they perceive their position to be fundamentally changed.

All in all, the EGD—with its inclusion of the social dimension to climate policy—can be interpreted as an intervention with the potential to induce field change in favor of eco-social integration at the national level. It constitutes a multilevel policy impulse that opens strategic opportunities for non-state actors. Accordingly, some challengers—particularly the more institutionalized ones, namely environmental NGOs, internationally active social NGOs, and service-sector trade unions—seek to leverage this opportunity to promote eco-social transformation and strengthen their position within the field. This provides support for Expectation 2, which posits that institutionalized challengers refer to external events as opportunities to improve their field position.

At the same time, it is evident that incumbent actors from the industrial sectors also perceive the EGD as an opportunity. Given their privileged access to resources, they are well positioned to articulate targeted demands and to shape the implementation of the EGD in line with their sectoral interests by emphasizing economic growth and industrial modernization rather than eco-social integration. Thus, in line with Expectation 4, while the EGD holds some transformative potential, the prevailing field dynamics suggest that its implementation is more likely to reinforce existing power asymmetries than to trigger substantive eco-social reconfiguration at the national level.

Taken together, these findings highlight both the opportunities and limitations of the EGD as a potential driver of eco-social integration: while it opens discursive and institutional space for challengers, the structural advantages of incumbents constrain its transformative potential. The following conclusion synthesizes these insights and reflects on their broader implications.

6 | Conclusion

This article has analyzed how non-state actors in Germany engage with the European Green Deal (EGD) as a field intervention and whether it contributes to eco-social integration at the national level. Building on field-theoretical considerations and drawing on multilevel empirical analysis, the findings highlight that actor responses to the EGD vary systematically with their field position and resource endowment.

As structurally advantaged actors within the field, incumbents tend to express more positive sentiments toward the EGD. This positive framing, however, does not indicate support for

eco-social integration, but rather reveals incumbents' strategy to co-opt new policies in line with their interests. Two strategies emerge to stabilize their position and reduce uncertainty associated with potential field change: either obstructing the EGD in general or highlighting the EGD's role for economic growth and industrial modernization in a positive manner to benefit from additional resources.

By contrast, challengers fall into two categories. The first consists of actors with limited resources, who generally do not strategically use the EGD to improve their position or promote eco-social integration. The second comprises well-equipped challengers—including internationally active social NGOs, environmental NGOs, and service-sector unions—who form the crucial category articulating eco-social interpretation of the EGD. While their sentiments vary, these actors mobilize the EGD as an opportunity to strengthen their position and to advance integrated approaches to climate and social policy.

Taken together, the analysis shows that the EGD introduces new discursive and institutional resources that could support eco-social integration at the national level. However, its potential to induce deeper field change remains limited, as incumbents are structurally advantaged to shape its interpretation and implementation in line with their interests. The current field configuration thus favors continuity over change, constraining the possibility for a broader eco-social reconfiguration. At the same time, the differentiated patterns of actor engagement observed in this article highlight that the EGD functions not only as a policy framework but also as a discursive opportunity structure shaped by field logics. How actors interpret and mobilize the EGD depends on their field position, resource endowment, and degree of institutional embeddedness.

Building on the findings of this study, several avenues for future research emerge. First, a systematic analysis of the different strategic usages of Europe (Jacquot and Woll 2003) in the eco-social policy context could offer valuable insights by analyzing differences regarding non-state actors' symbolic, cognitive, and strategic references to the EGD. Second, extending the qualitative component through a frame analysis of actor communications could offer deeper insights into how actors construct meaning around the EGD. Third, refining actor classification through more detailed data on resources and institutional positioning would enhance explanatory power. Finally, comparative research across EU member states could clarify whether the findings are Germany-specific or reflect broader multilevel dynamics.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Endnotes

- ¹ Additionally, some fields—such as policy fields—are shaped by internal governance units, which primarily serve to “reinforce the dominant perspective and guard the interests of the incumbents” (Fligstein and McAdam 2012, 14). As this paper focuses on non-state actors, this category is not further considered, although their reinforcing function may position them as an additional resource for incumbents.
- ² Semantic Coherence measures the co-occurrence of words and selective mutual information (Mimno et al. 2011), while Exclusivity measures the appearance of words in different topics.
- ³ Different spellings and both German and English-language variants of the terms were considered and aggregated.
- ⁴ Since Attac is the only actor among the less-equipped challengers that refers to the EGD at all, the two subcategories of challengers are combined at this point. A qualitative analysis of the other less-equipped challengers is not feasible due to the lack of relevant data.

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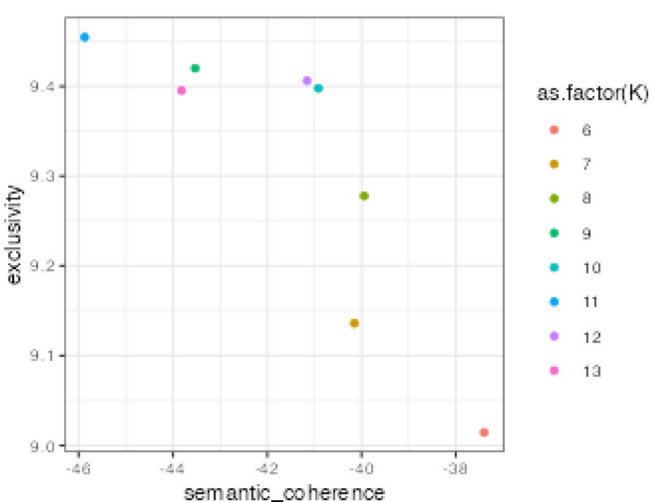
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Appendix A

Average Exclusivity and Semantic Coherence for Models With Different Numbers of Topics (K)



Appendix B

Most Frequent Words for Topics in the Estimated STM With K=9

