

Tracking the Attention Deficit: Defense Policy in Brazil's Congress (1988-2019)

Rastreado o déficit de atenção: a política de defesa no congresso Brasileiro (1988–2019)

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INTRODUCTION

Existing scholarship suggests that defense policy is a low-priority area for civilian political elites in Brazil and Latin America more broadly, reflecting what some describe as an “attention deficit” (Pion-Berlin and Arceneaux 2000; Mathias et al. 2008; Pion-Berlin and Trinkunas 2007; Sotomayor Velázquez 2008; Pion-Berlin and Martínez 2017; Bruneau 2018; Jenne and Martínez 2021). The literature attributes this deficit to several factors. Internationally, it is linked to the relatively peaceful relations between Brazil and its neighbors. Domestically, it stems from weak civilian incentives and limited institutional capacity to engage with defense-related issues. In Brazil, reflecting the broader regional pattern, the military retains significant autonomy and influence while civilians often defer or neglect defense-related policymaking.

Despite this characterization, few studies offer systematic empirical assessments of the degree and nature of political engagement with defense issues in the legislative process. Key unanswered questions remain: How much attention do politicians devote to defense policy at the agenda-setting and decision-making stages? Does low salience equate to a complete absence of engagement? When politicians do act, which dimensions of defense policy attract their focus? And to what extent has the evolution

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of civil-military relations — marked by partial democratic oversight and expanding military roles in domestic affairs — influenced the patterns of legislative attention to defense? These questions remain central to advancing our understanding of how defense policymaking operates in contemporary democracies with constrained civilian control.

This paper undertakes a preliminary study revisiting the “attention deficit” in Brazil’s defense policymaking through a quantitative analysis of policy activity from 1988 to 2019. We collect policymaking data covering the period from 1988 to 2019 from the Brazilian Policy Agendas Project (BPAP), which is part of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP), an international collaborative initiative designed to facilitate cross-national comparisons of issue attention over time. As one of CAP’s national datasets, BPAP employs a standardized codebook that includes 21 macro-codes covering key public policy sectors such as defense, health, education, economy, and environment, with each macro-code further divided into area-specific sub-codes. This study primarily focuses on macro-code 16, relating to Defense, Armed Forces, Military, and War, and its subtopics (see appendix for a complete list). Our analysis is limited to three specific instruments: bills/laws, constitutional amendment proposals/amendments, and budget appropriations in defense policy.

This study analyzes overall political attention to defense policy, regardless of whether the proposals originated in the Executive or Legislative branches, or in one chamber over another. While our data allow us to measure the volume, outcomes, and diversity of defense-related policymaking, we do not disaggregate by institutional origin. This is a deliberate scope choice in this preliminary study, aimed at identifying macro-level patterns of engagement with the defense agenda. Future work will explore the distribution of activity between institutional actors in greater detail.

This paper argues that Brazil’s “attention deficit” in defense policymaking is not characterized by a complete absence of policy activity, but rather by a persistent disconnection between agenda-setting and law-making. Although the number of defense proposals has increased significantly over the past three decades — especially following key institutional changes such as the 1999 ministerial reform and the congressional strengthening processes of 2001, 2009, and 2014 — approval rates for defense laws remained consistently low, indicating that many initiatives stall before reaching the decision-making stage. Additionally, defense legislation exhibits lower thematic diversity compared to other policy areas, with activity largely concentrated in a few subtopics, such as general policy and military personnel.

The study also evaluates whether increases in defense spending have encouraged broader policy engagement. Despite a substantial rise in the executed defense budget from 2000 to 2019, no correlation is found between budget growth and policy activity or diversity, reinforcing the argument that financial expansion alone does not incentivize deeper or more varied involvement in defense policymaking. In sum, the findings reveal that institutional and budgetary shifts — though significant — have not altered the underlying dynamics of the attention deficit: defense policy remains a low-salience, high-friction domain, marked by symbolic engagement and limited follow-through.

Beyond identifying a gap in the literature, this paper highlights the political consequences of defense policy neglect in Brazil. Treating defense as a low priority weakens civilian oversight, reduces transparency, and sustains military autonomy incompatible with democratic norms. As Croissant et al. (2010) note, civilian control in emerging democracies requires more than coup prevention; it demands oversight of military missions, budgets, and internal organization. In Brazil, budgetary control is one of the few available levers. However, according to this paper, it is largely misused or neglected. This failure not only undermines one of the few instruments of civilian oversight but also reinforces the democratic deficit in defense policymaking, underscoring the urgency of greater policy engagement.

The paper is organized as follows: the next section reviews the existing literature on the topic, while the third section outlines our methodology and presents our hypotheses. The fourth section details the results of our empirical analysis, and the final section offers conclusions and suggests directions for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defense policymaking involves developing rules and standards to oversee the organization, training, deployment, and funding of the Armed Forces (Bruneau and Tollefson 2006). In Latin America, politicians have traditionally paid little attention to this area due to a lack of external threats and perceived minimal economic or social influence within these democracies (Pion-Berlin and Trinkunas 2007). Additionally, compared to other regions of the world, defense policy in Latin America generates little employment (Pion-Berlin and Trinkunas 2007), prompting politicians to prioritize socioeconomic policies over military-related initiatives.

In the case of Brazil, Dos Santos (2018) demonstrates that defense policy cannot be classified as a fully consolidated State policy: while there

is some continuity across administrations, partisan ideology and political conjuncture have significantly shaped its content and priorities, revealing important features of government policy. Fuccille (2005) adds that the creation of the Ministry of Defense under President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, though an important institutional innovation, was part of a broader effort to redefine the role of the military in the democratic state — an effort still incomplete, as full civilian control remains a necessary but insufficient condition for democratic consolidation.

Unsurprisingly, Brazil's Congress supposedly has had limited involvement in defense policymaking (Amorim Neto 2010; Pimenta 2023), undermining civilian oversight of the military and weakening transparency and legitimacy in this area (Donadio 2024). Pion-Berlin (2005) notes that political parties rarely emphasize defense issues in their platforms, and defense committees cannot often provide effective oversight. This challenge is compounded by high turnover, as committee members and executive officials do not remain in their roles long enough to effectively develop the expertise necessary to address complex defense matters (Pimenta 2022).

Indeed, Fledes (2005) critiques the limited impact of Brazil's Foreign Affairs and National Defense Committees in both the Chamber of Deputies (CREDN) and the Senate (CRE). According to him, these committees exhibit low levels of activism regarding defense matters, with only 5% of the CRE's activities addressing defense issues. Between 1989 and 2001, only 1.9% of legislative initiatives related to defense became law, suggesting that the Brazilian Congress rarely acts as a significant check on defense policy. Jungmann (2009) adds that Brazil's political elites, especially parliamentarians, lack expertise in defense. This lack of knowledge hampers Congress's ability to engage in meaningful defense oversight.

Fledes (2005) also reveals that the Senate's legislative consultancy on defense consists of just one expert, a retired general. This demonstrates the limited resources available to lawmakers for making informed decisions on defense policy. In contrast, the military maintains a strong lobbying presence within Congress, further complicating efforts to establish effective civilian oversight. The imbalance of expertise and lobbying power means that legislative oversight of military affairs remains weak, with Congress playing only a minor role in shaping defense policy.

However, studies have begun to challenge this perspective. Giraldo (2006) stresses that Brazilian legislative committees, particularly in the defense sector, play a fundamental role in defense policymaking. Castro Santos (2005) notes that between 1995 and 2004, the legislative defense committees held 68 public hearings on defense matters, indicating some level of engagement. More recently, Duarte (2022) identifies the estab-

ishment of a more plural public dimension regarding defense policy formulation in Brazil over the last 30 years. However, the efficacy of these engagements is debatable, as Amorim Neto (2010) notes that defense legislation in Brazil tends to pass with overwhelming consensus, often close to unanimity. While this consensus may indicate a convergence of party positions on defense policy, it could also reflect a lack of deep engagement with the subject or an overall disinterest in defense matters within Congress.

The presence of divergent views underscores the relevance of the topic and the need for further investigation. Moreover, the fact that we rely on references spanning from 2005 to 2024 — many of which highlight Congress's persistent neglect of defense policy — suggests that little has changed over the past two decades. Few studies directly address whether empirical evidence supports the “attention deficit” claim (Pion-Berlin and Trinkunas 2007), which suggests that politicians generally regard defense as a low-priority policy area. One exception is Sales (2024), which analyzes defense-related activities of Brazil's Federal Audit Court (TCU) and parliamentary committees between 2018 and 2022. Analyzing budget data, TCU decisions, and defense standing committee deliberations, the author confirms the lack of focus on defense, attributing it to the technical nature of defense topics.

This paper contributes to the study of defense policy by revisiting the “attention deficit” in policymaking and budgeting from 1988 and 2019. It also contributes to the policymaking literature in Brazil, shedding light on the institutional dynamics that shape policy neglect. Brasil et al. (2023) demonstrate that government attention over the federal budget generally follows a predominantly incremental pattern, with occasional punctuations in specific sectoral policies, validating the application of Brazil's punctuated equilibrium theory (PET). The authors highlight the need for further sector-specific research to explore other indicators of government attention, such as the proposal and approval of different laws and regulations, the causes and effects of these punctuations, their relationship with shifts in the policy agenda, and the impact of institutional crises on budget allocation priorities — key areas identified for future investigation. This paper is the first step to address these challenges.

METHODOLOGY AND HYPOTHESES

This preliminary study adopts a methodological approach that reports descriptive statistics. We seek answers to the following questions: What is the relative position of defense policy within the broader policy agenda

in Brazil, and how can we evaluate whether the attention it receives is proportionate to the country's context? How does this relative "attention deficit" manifest in concrete policy outputs (or in their absence)? When defense policy is addressed, what dimensions (e.g., military operations, veterans' welfare, strategic planning) tend to attract legislative focus? How has the evolving nature of civil-military relations in Brazil influenced the agenda-setting and production of defense-related policies?

Brazil presents a compelling case for studying legislative attention to defense policy. As the largest country in Latin America, with a historically influential and politically active military, Brazil faces the dual challenge of consolidating civilian control over the armed forces while addressing pressing social demands. The persistence of military tutelage in political affairs — particularly visible in the post-democratization period — makes the analysis of legislative inaction or selective engagement with defense policy especially pertinent. Understanding how and why elected representatives prioritize (or marginalize) this domain helps clarify the broader institutional dynamics of Brazil's democracy and the still-contested role of the military within it.

We collected data on policymaking from 1988 to 2019.¹ This analysis focuses on the period between 1988 and 2019, beginning with the adoption of Brazil's new Constitution following the transition from military rule, and ending in 2019 — the year the Armed Forces officially reentered the political arena under the Jair Bolsonaro administration.

Building on public policy scholarship (Jones and Baumgartner 2005), we use policymaking data (i.e., bills, laws, and budgets) as proxies to assess the level of attention legislators devote to various policy areas, including defense.² Our data comes from the Brazilian Policy Agendas Project (BPAP), which integrates the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP). CAP aims to facilitate cross-national comparisons of issue attention over time — such as assessing the prominence of defense in policy agendas or how much emphasis a president places on healthcare in annual speeches compared to other topics.

To achieve this, CAP compiles datasets spanning various political activities, including annual speeches, party manifestos, policy actions (bills, laws, and budgets), oversight activities (oral and written questions, hearings), front-page newspaper stories, and social media posts. Each entry — whether a bill, law, question, speech excerpt, manifesto reference, or media story — is classified using a predefined coding scheme rather than relying on keyword searches. CAP applies content analysis (Bardin 1977) to measure issue attention, enabling systematic comparisons across time and facilitating the exploration of questions previously unexamined through

quantitative methods. All datasets are coded twice by human coders following the project's codebook to ensure consistency and accuracy.

National teams adapt the codebook to reflect their countries' specific political contexts. Following the CAP standard, the BPAP codebook includes 21 macro-codes representing public policy sectors such as defense, health, education, economy, and environment. Additionally, each macro-code contains area-specific topics, referred to as sub-codes. Each piece of data is assigned one macro-code and, subsequently, one sub-code. This study will primarily focus on macro-code 16, which relates to Defense, Armed Forces, Military, and War, along with its subtopics (refer to the appendix for a complete list). All policy areas include two standard subtopics: General (--00) and Others (--99). The General subtopic pertains to broad resource allocations that do not specify destinations, effectively shifting responsibility for these allocations from the Legislative to the Executive branch. Conversely, the Others subtopic encompasses unique, one-time components that do not fit within the established categories of this policy area.

While the BPAP categorizes a wide range of proposals and legislation, our focus is limited to three specific instruments. The first two encompass policymakers' main tools to advance policy change: bills/laws and constitutional amendment proposals/amendments. The third focuses on budgets, specifically appropriations related to defense policy (all budget data have been adjusted for inflation). It is important to note that our data does not differentiate between instruments originating from the Executive or Legislative branches, nor does it distinguish between the two chambers of the Legislature. Instead, in this preliminary study, we analyze all three instruments collectively as a measure of the attention directed by politicians from both branches to the defense policy area. Our next step involves analyzing these data based on their origin.

Using these data, we calculate five key metrics: the total number of bills, laws, constitutional amendment proposals and constitutional amendments related to defense; the bill-to-law conversion rate for both bills and constitutional amendments in the defense sector;³ the annual change⁴ in policy activity encompassing bills, laws, constitutional amendment proposals, and constitutional amendments; the annual change rates for policy activity (including bills, laws, constitutional amendment proposals, and constitutional amendments) and budget activity (appropriations); and Shannon's H index, an entropy measure that reflects the diversity of policy subtopics across bills, constitutional amendment proposals, and laws.

Our application of Shannon's H index diverges from the traditional approach in public policy literature. Instead of treating each policy docu-

ment as an individual unit of analysis, we focus on the variety of subtopics present across the entire policy activity within each policy area, such as defense, health, and social security. Specifically, we examine all documents produced in the defense sector to assess whether there is a greater or lesser diversity of subtopics in that area compared to others and across different legislatures. In essence, our index is calculated based on the frequency of subtopic occurrences over a specified period rather than the frequency of individual subtopics within separate policy documents.⁵ In our analysis, lower Shannon index values indicate reduced attention to diverse topics within the policy area. This suggests that policy activity is limited to only one or two aspects of a broader area.

Our methodology allows us to assess the relative salience of the issue over time and in comparison to other topics within the same institutional setting. We recognize that this approach has limitations,⁶ particularly in a context where defense may justifiably receive less attention than more urgent socioeconomic issues. Nevertheless, this methodology is appropriate as a first step in identifying patterns of engagement (or neglect), which can then be complemented by qualitative analyses of deliberative content, Executive-Legislative dynamics, and public opinion in future research.

Building on existing literature, we evaluate the following hypotheses. Hypotheses 1a and 1b serve as a direct test of the attention deficit hypothesis: in comparison to other policy areas, the average number of bills and laws, as well as the bill-to-law conversion rate, are expected to be lower within defense policy.⁷

Hypothesis 1a: The average number of bills and laws related to defense policy is lower than that of other policy areas.

Hypothesis 1b: The rate of bill-to-law conversion in defense policy is lower than in other policy areas.⁸

Hypotheses 2 and 3 are grounded in the public policy literature. Jones and Baumgartner (2005) argue that higher friction levels (i.e., institutional and cognitive barriers) are more prevalent in the later stages of the policymaking process. Consequently, increasing defense policymaking does not necessarily lead to heightened budget allocation in this area, as making budget decisions is often more challenging for policymakers than proposing bills (Hypothesis 2).

Hypothesis 2: Increases in the overall defense policymaking may not result in higher budget allocation in defense policy.

We also evaluate the level of entropy within the defense policy agenda, which reflects the degree of diversity in policy attention within this area. In line with the attention deficit hypothesis, Hypothesis 3a posits that an increase in the volume of defense policy bills and laws will not necessarily lead to higher entropy. Similarly, Hypothesis 3b suggests that increases in the defense budget do not correspond to greater diversity in policy focus.

Hypothesis 3a: An increase in the volume of defense policy bills and laws does not correspond to a rise in policy diversity (entropy).

Hypothesis 3b: Increases in the defense budget do not correspond to greater policy diversity (entropy).

Hypotheses 4 and 5 address the influence of broader institutional developments on defense policymaking. Transformations in civil-military relations, such as establishing a dedicated defense institution within the Executive bureaucracy, may increase the number of bills and laws related to defense policy (Hypothesis 4). Similarly, the institutional strengthening of the Legislative branch can empower legislators to engage more actively in defense policymaking, leading to a higher volume of bills and laws in the area (Hypothesis 5).⁹

Hypothesis 4: The establishment of the Ministry of Defense leads to a rise in the number of bills and laws related to defense policy.

Hypothesis 5: The volume of defense policy legislation grows as Congress strengthens institutionally.

These hypotheses are grounded in key theoretical and empirical insights from public policy and civil-military relations literature. The attention deficit hypothesis (1a and 1b) draws from the work of Pion-Berlin, Trinkunas, and others who argue that defense policy in Latin America suffers from chronically low political salience due to a lack of electoral incentives and institutional expertise. From a public policy perspective, the application of policy attention theories — particularly punctuated equilibrium theory (PET) and issue-attention dynamics (Jones and Baumgartner 2005) — helps us conceptualize the disconnect between problem severity (e.g., military politicization or defense spending) and policy engagement.

Hypotheses 2 and 3 extend these ideas by incorporating friction and entropy as analytical lenses: policymaking is often constrained by institutional complexity and political costs, and increased activity in terms of volume does not necessarily translate into meaningful diversity or re-

source shifts. Finally, hypotheses 4 and 5 are rooted in institutionalist approaches to policy change, suggesting that reforms such as the creation of the Ministry of Defense or shifts in legislative capacity may alter the structure of political opportunity, making it more likely for defense issues to be introduced and debated. Together, these hypotheses aim to empirically test whether long-standing claims in the literature about legislative neglect of defense policy hold up when measured against a systematic analysis of policy outputs and agenda dynamics over time. The following section evaluates these hypotheses.

EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

Defense Policy Descriptive Statistics

Our database for the 1988-2019 period contains 52,891 observations, 1,125 of which pertain to defense policy (code 16).¹⁰ All hypotheses are tested using aggregate data on defense-related policy instruments, encompassing both Executive and Legislative initiatives. The analysis does not isolate the contributions of each branch, focusing instead on identifying system-level patterns of attention.

Hypothesis Testing: Policymaking and Defense Policy

We begin by examining hypotheses 1a, which posit that the average number of bills and laws in defense policy are lower than in other policy areas. Figure 1 shows the total number of defense-related propositions (Code 16) compared to the average number of propositions across all policy areas for each congressional session period (1988-2019). While there is a gradual increase in defense proposals over time, the volume remains consistently below the average across policy areas, especially during the 2003-2007 to the 2019 periods. This supports Hypothesis 1a, which posits that defense policy receives lower legislative attention compared to other issue areas. The significant gap between defense and overall averages reflects the enduring marginality of defense on the policy agenda.



Figure 1 — Average Proposals by Policy Area by Congressional Session Period (1988-2019).

Note: The graph includes bills and constitutional amendment proposals.

The pattern in Figure 2, which compares the number of defense-related laws to the average number of laws per policy code across congressional session, is markedly different. The fluctuations in defense output, especially the sharp peak in the 50th session followed by sustained lower levels, contrast with the steady increase in average legislative activity in other policy areas. After peaking during the 1995–1998 period, when President Fernando Henrique Cardoso’s bureaucratic reform agenda included the creation of the Ministry of Defense and efforts to redefine the role of the Armed Forces, average legislative activity in defense declined between 1999 and 2003. This subsequent period coincided with the approval of the Disarmament Statute, a major legislative initiative overseen by the Armed Forces, whose passage may have diminished congressional interest in defense policy in its aftermath.

This trend highlights a persistent disconnect between the volume of proposals and the number of laws passed: while defense is increasingly addressed at the agenda-setting stage, it is rarely prioritized during legislative negotiations or deliberation. Moreover, despite occasional spikes in proposal volume, defense legislation remains out of step with broader legislative trends, reinforcing the notion of selective and inconsistent political engagement with the sector.

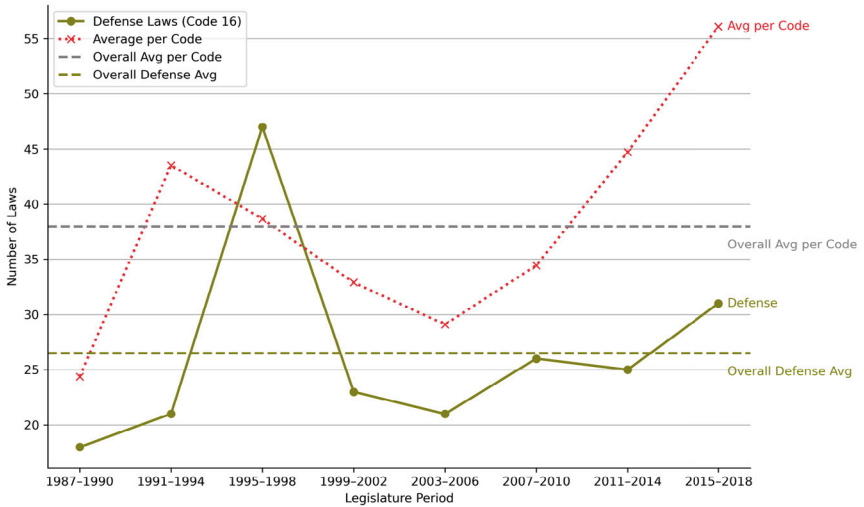


Figure 2 — Average Legislation by Policy Area by Congressional Session Period (1988-2019).

Note: The graph includes laws and constitutional amendments.

Figures 3 and 4 offer strong empirical support for Hypothesis 1b. While defense-related proposals have increased over time (Figure 1), their conversion into laws or constitutional amendments remains markedly lower than the average across policy areas. The passage of constitutional amendments in defense is extremely rare, with near-zero rates after the 50th congressional session. This is particularly striking given that the Brazilian Constitution’s *cláusulas pétreas* (entrenched clauses) make no direct reference to defense matters. Precisely because defense is absent from these unamendable provisions, one might expect both more frequent attempts and possibly greater ease in passing amendments in this area, especially considering defense’s foundational role in safeguarding the State itself. Yet the data show the opposite: minimal activity and near-total legislative inertia. Similarly, the conversion rate for defense bills — once relatively high — declines sharply after the 50th session and remains below the overall average through the 56th. This persistent gap suggests that defense policy faces substantial friction in the decision-making stage, whether due to political disinterest, institutional bottlenecks, or lack of consensus. Despite increased agenda-setting activity, defense policy remains marginal in terms of concrete policy outcomes.

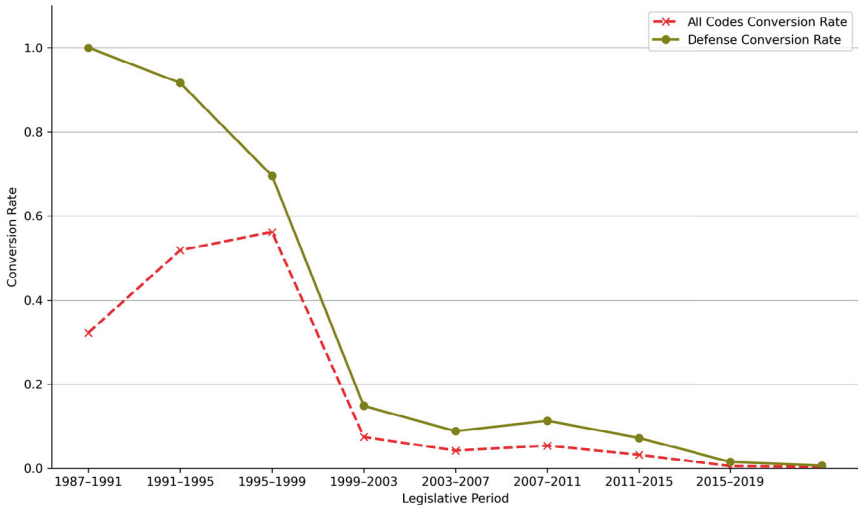


Figure 3 — Law Conversion Rate by Congressional Session Period (1988-2019).

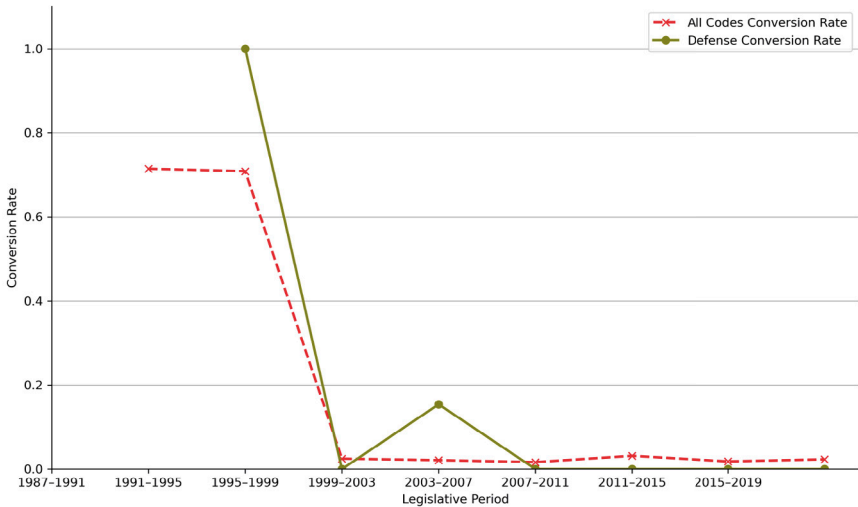


Figure 4 — Constitutional Amendment Conversion Rate by Congressional Session Period (1988-2019).

To test hypothesis 2 (increases in the overall defense policymaking do not directly result in higher budget allocation in defense policy), we plot the annual changes in policy activity and defense budget from 2001 to

2018. The policy activity data encompasses bills and laws. In contrast, the budget data pertains to appropriations (expenses approved in the budget law, although not all these funds may have been disbursed).

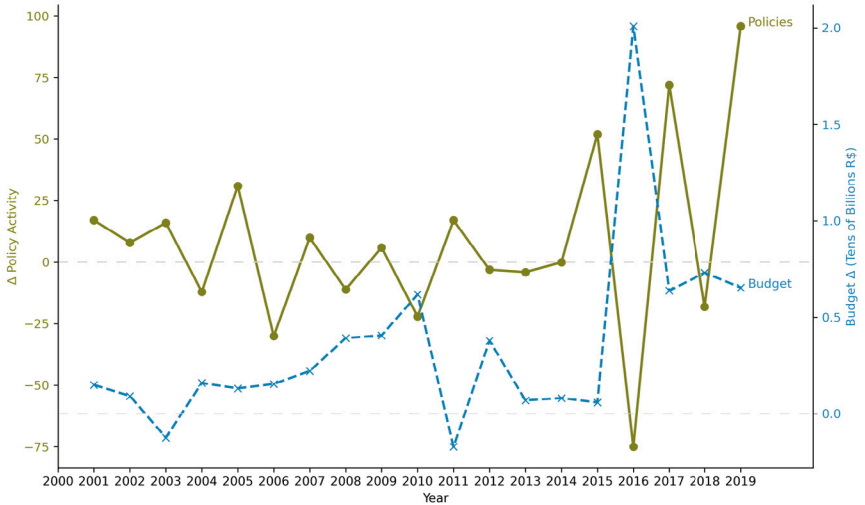


Figure 5 — Annual Changes in Policy Activity and Defense Budget by Year (2001-2019).

Figure 5 provides strong support for Hypothesis 2 by illustrating the absence of correlation between changes in legislative activity and defense budget allocation from 2000 to 2019. The data reveal several moments of clear disjuncture: the most notable increase in budget allocations (2016) coincides with a sharp drop in policy engagement, while the most significant spike in defense-related legislative proposals (2019) occurs without a corresponding rise in the budget. These asynchronous fluctuations suggest that defense policymaking and financial planning operate on distinct political logics. In other words, greater resource commitment does not translate into increased activity in the policy arena, highlighting a weak link between material investment and policy engagement.

Before examining Shannon’s H index, we examine the subtopics within defense policy. The defense policy area comprises 18 possible subtopics, but one particularly warrants special attention when discussing diversity: the General subtopic (1600). This subtopic encompasses all documents related to fund and resource allocations that lack specific targets. As a result, it delegates the responsibility for distributing these funds to the

Executive branch, specifically the military, which decides how to allocate them to various areas.

Figures 6 and 7 reveal that the General subtopic receives a distinctive type of attention: it underperforms the average across other defense subtopics during the proposal stage but outperforms it during the decision-making stage. Figure 6, which presents the legislature's average annual number of defense-related proposals per subtopic and congressional session, partially illustrates this pattern. The yearly average number of proposals for subcode 1600 remains slightly below the average for all other subtopics during the 1987–1990 and 2007–2010 periods, significantly below average in the 2011–2014 and 2015–2018 periods, and slightly above average in the 2019–2022 period. This indicates that the General subtopic (1600) receives equal or less attention than others during the agenda-setting phase.

Figure 7, which aggregates the yearly average number of enacted laws per subtopic and congressional session, shows that from the 1995–1999 to the 2015–2019 periods, the average number of laws across subtopics remains relatively stable — ranging between 2 and 5 laws. In contrast, the General subtopic consistently receives above-average attention, with figures ranging from 7 to 27 laws. A pronounced spike occurs in the 1995–1999 period, when legislation in the General category far exceeds the subtopic average. Although this volume declines in subsequent periods, the General subtopic continues to attract disproportionately more legislative attention (in terms of laws passed) compared to other subtopics throughout the entire timeframe.

This not only confirms the subtopic centrality in defense policy activity but also underscores a troubling pattern: politicians disproportionately direct their efforts toward a subtopic that lacks programmatic specificity and effectively cedes decision-making authority to the Executive. This overemphasis on a non-specific subtopic suggests that activity in defense policy is not just limited in scope but also characterized by a tendency to delegate rather than deliberate.

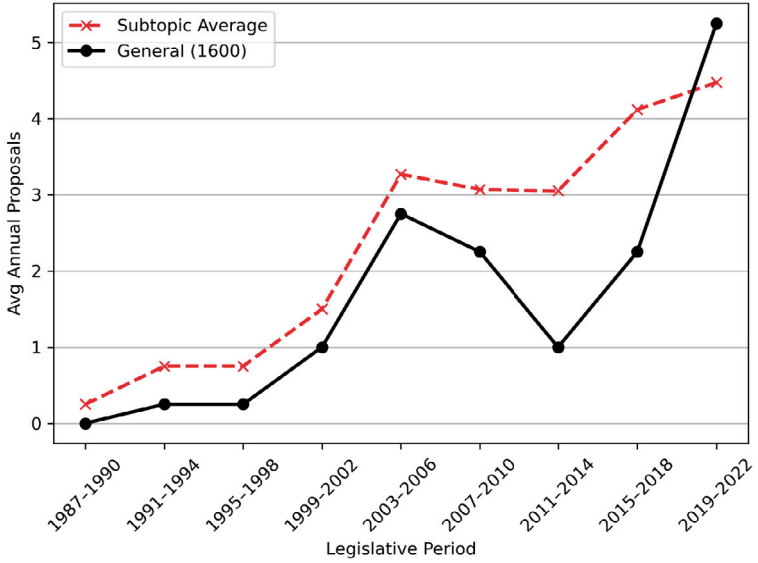


Figure 6 — Number of Proposals by Subtopic and Congressional Session Period (1988-2019).

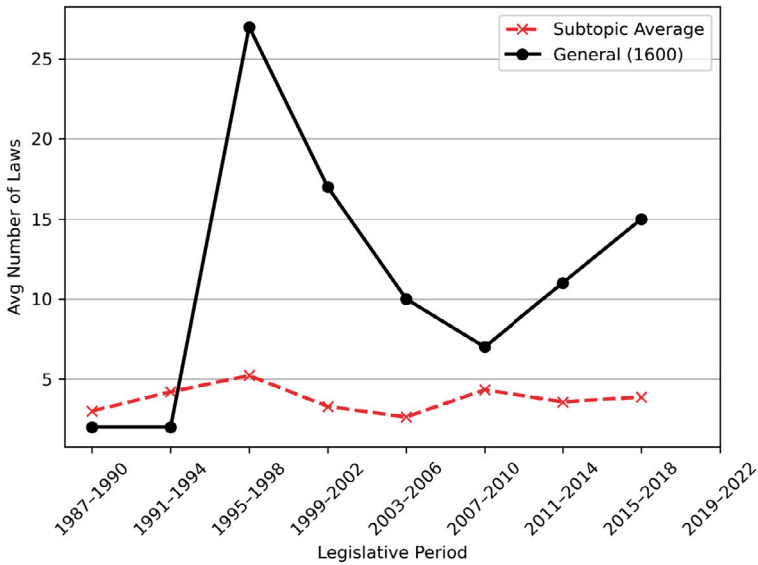


Figure 7 — Number of Laws and Constitutional Amendments by Subtopic and Congressional Session Period (1988-2019).

Hypotheses Testing: Entropy

Figure 8 displays Shannon's H index (diversity) for various documents, including bills, constitutional amendment proposals, and laws from 1988 to 2019.¹¹ In our approach, lower indices represent reduced diversity in topics within the defense area, suggesting that policy activity concentrates on a reduced number of components. To find the maximum possible index for the 18 subtopics, we calculate $\ln(18)$, resulting in a value of 2.89. An entropy score of 0 indicates that attention is concentrated on a single topic, whereas a score of 2.89 implies an even distribution of attention across all 18 subtopics (Boydston, Bevan, and Thomas 2014). In our analysis, attention primarily centers on two specific subtopics, General and Human Resources, with only occasional references to one or two others. The limited observations of these additional themes indicate a substantial emphasis on the two primary focus areas.

The data provide strong support for Hypothesis 3a, which posits that increases in the volume of defense policy bills and laws do not necessarily lead to higher entropy. In Figure 8 (bills), entropy levels for defense (Code 16) remain consistently lower than those for other policy areas across most periods, with only one major increase in the 1995–1998 one. This jump appears to be the exception rather than the rule and does not follow the exceptional period of greatest increase in policy volume seen in earlier figures.

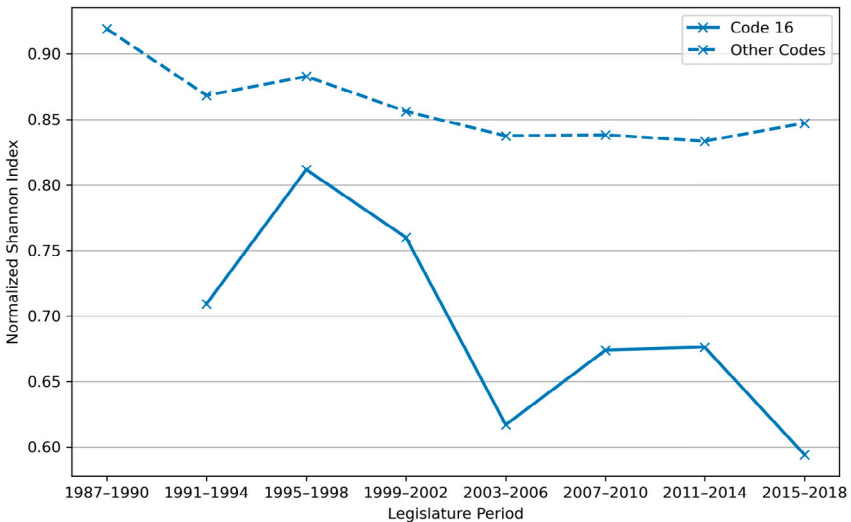


Figure 8 — Shannon's H index for Bills by Congressional Session Period (1988–2019).

Figure 9 shows a similar trend for constitutional amendment proposals, except for a slight increase during the 1999–2002 and 2003–2006 periods. This increase coincides with the lowest entropy values on the other codes index, indicating a trend toward concentration on a narrower set of themes during that time. In all other periods, the diversity of defense-related constitutional amendment proposals remains significantly lower than that of other codes.

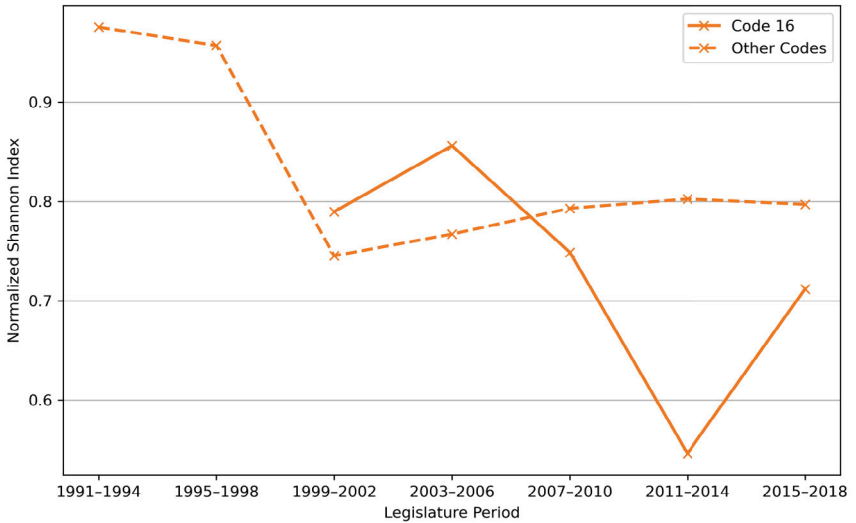


Figure 9 — Shannon’s H index for Constitutional Amendment Proposals (1988-2019).

Figure 10 reinforces the trend for laws: despite occasional peaks in legislative volume (as seen earlier), there is no sustained increase in diversity. The entropy index for defense laws remains either stagnant or lower than average across the entire period analyzed, aside from a spike in the 2007-2011 period. Even in that case, the increase is temporary and not associated with broader diversification in subsequent periods. Taken together, these figures confirm that increased attention to defense policy does not translate into broader thematic engagement. Instead, policy activity tends to remain narrowly focused, providing empirical support for the attention deficit hypothesis as articulated in Hypothesis 3a.

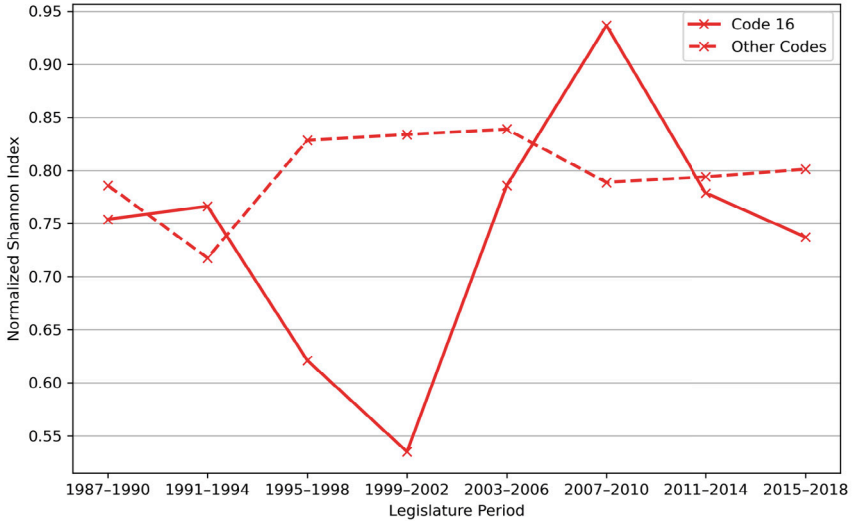


Figure 10 — Shannon’s H index for Laws by Congressional Session Period (1988-2019).

We now evaluate hypothesis 3b, which posits that increases in the defense budget do not correlate with greater entropy. Figure 11 displays the executed defense budget in Brazil from 2000 to 2019. Over this period, the budget grew significantly — from R\$ 9.1 billion in 2000 to R\$ 75.6 billion in 2019, representing an increase of R\$ 66.5 billion. This upward trajectory, particularly steep after 2015, highlights the state’s growing financial commitment to the defense sector. However, when juxtaposed with the findings from Figures 8–10 on policy entropy, it becomes clear that this budgetary growth has not translated into greater thematic diversity in defense legislation, thereby lending strong support to Hypothesis 3b.

Despite a nearly eightfold increase in resources over two decades, attention in defense remains concentrated in a few subtopics — primarily General and Human Resources — without evidence of a broader agenda emerging in response to this expanded fiscal space. In key years where the budget increases sharply (such as 2016–2019), we observe no corresponding or sustained rise in Shannon entropy scores for defense-related bills, laws, or constitutional amendments. This suggests that budget growth does not stimulate more comprehensive or diversified policy engagement with the area. Instead, increased funding appears decoupled from efforts to articulate or oversee a more complex defense agenda.

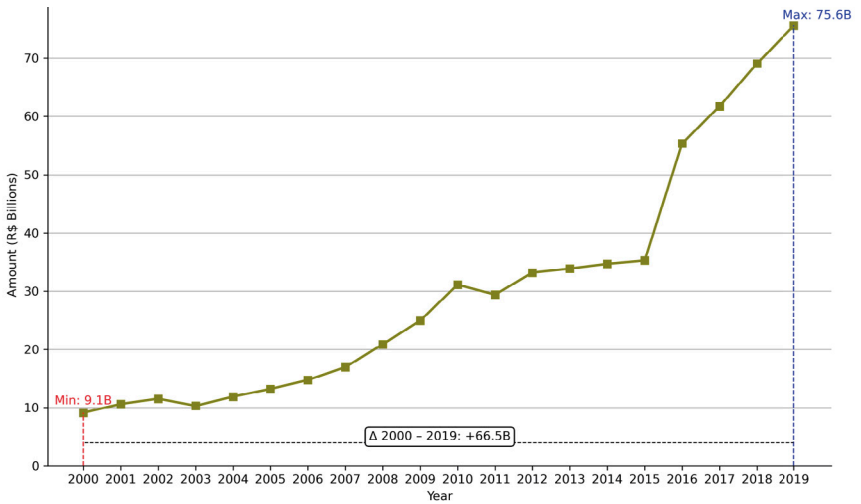


Figure 11 — Defense Budget Appropriations by Year (2001-2018).

Hypotheses Testing: Institutional Changes

To what extent did the establishment of the Ministry of Defense impact the number of defense bills and laws (hypothesis 4)? Figure 12 shows the number of bills and constitutional amendment proposals, while Figure 11 illustrates the number of laws and constitutional amendments, before and after 1999 (when Brazil’s Ministry of Defense was created). Figure 12 shows a clear and sustained increase in the average number of defense-related proposals following the Ministry’s creation. Prior to 1999, the average was just 4.1 proposals per year, while in the post-1999 period this number jumped to 34.8 proposals per year — an eightfold increase. This sharp rise suggests that the institutionalization of a centralized civilian defense authority stimulated agenda-setting activity in Congress, lending support to Hypothesis 4 in terms of proposal volume.

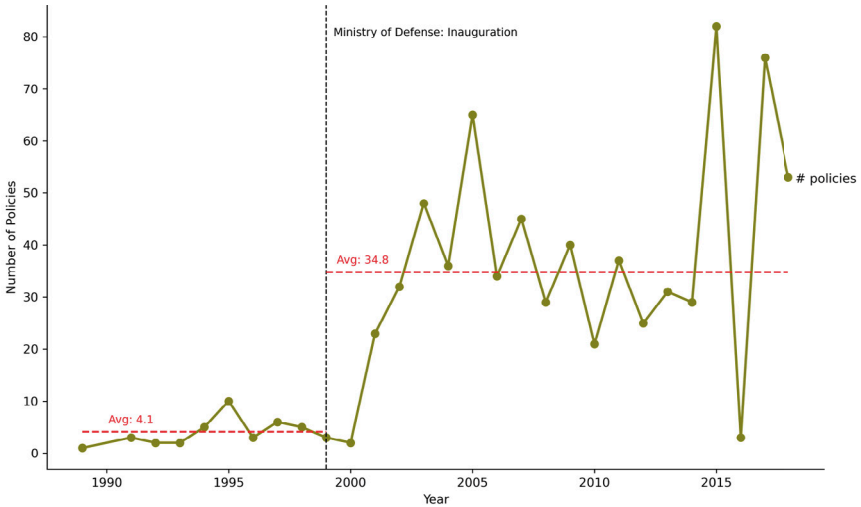


Figure 12 — Number of Defense Proposals Before and After 1999 by Year (1988-2019).

However, Figure 13, which tracks enacted defense legislation (i.e., laws and constitutional amendments), tells a more complex story. The average number of policies passed per year decreased after 1999 — from 7.8 per year before to 6.0 per year after the Ministry’s creation. Although there are some peaks (e.g., 2012 and 2019), these do not establish a consistent upward trend. This contrast between the volume of proposals and final legislation suggests that while the Ministry of Defense may have encouraged more defense-related legislative initiatives, it did not improve the likelihood that such proposals would be successfully converted into law.

Thus, the data partially support Hypothesis 4. The creation of the Ministry of Defense clearly increased legislative activity in the agenda-setting phase, as evidenced by the sharp rise in proposals. However, this institutional reform did not translate into a sustained increase in policy outputs. This finding reinforces earlier conclusions about the friction and low conversion rates within defense policymaking: even when defense gains institutional visibility, structural and political barriers continue to limit its policy success.

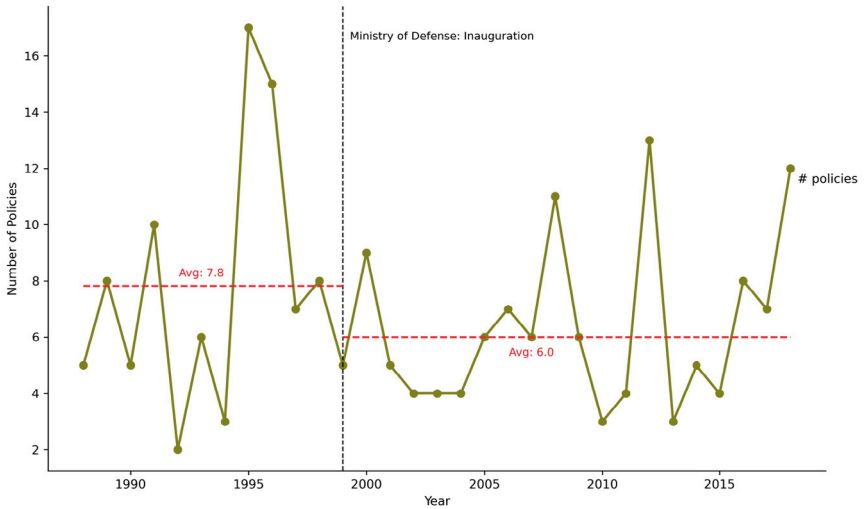


Figure 13 — Number of Defense Laws Before and After 1999 by Year (1988–2019).

Finally, does the strengthening of Congress correlate with increased legislative activity in defense policy at the agenda-setting and decision-making stages (Hypothesis 5)? To assess this question, we examine three key milestones in the institutional evolution of Brazil’s Congress that expanded its autonomy and legislative capacity: the 2001 reform that curtailed the president’s authority to indefinitely edit provisional measures; the 2009 shift identified by Almeida (2014), when Congress began approving more laws initiated by legislators than by the Executive; and the 2014–2015 budget reform, which standardized the allocation of earmarks, thereby reducing the president’s leverage in coalition-building (Faria 2022).

These milestones represent critical junctures in the rebalancing of power between the Executive and Legislative branches. If defense policy suffers from a persistent “attention deficit,” as this article argues, then such institutional strengthening should, in theory, provide policymakers with greater opportunity and incentive to engage substantively with this neglected policy area. In this sense, the milestones are not only indicators of congressional empowerment — they are empirical tests of whether structural reforms translate into meaningful engagement in low-salience domains such as defense.

Figure 14 shows a substantial and sustained increase in the volume of defense-related proposals after 2001. The average annual number of

proposals before 2001 was just 3.8, but this jumps to 39.0 immediately after the first milestone. Although there is a slight dip in the post-2009 period (down to 30.8), activity rises again following the 2014–2015 congressional earmark reform, reaching an average of 47.5 proposals. These data suggest that as Congress gained institutional power — particularly through greater budgetary autonomy and reduced executive decree authority — policymakers have increasingly placed defense on the policy agenda. This supports Hypothesis 5 about the agenda-setting phase: congressional empowerment appears to correlate with greater willingness to propose defense-related initiatives, even in a policy area typically marked by low salience.

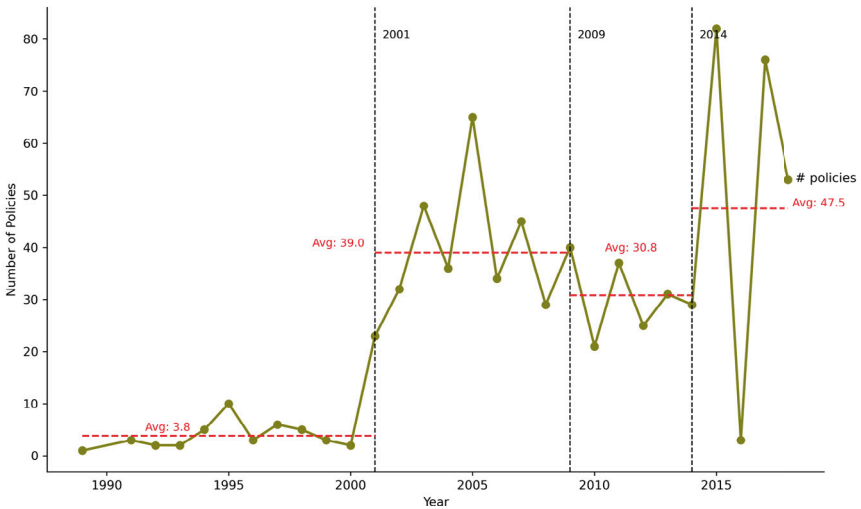


Figure 14 — Number of Defense Proposals by Congressional Milestone and Year (1988–2019).

Figure 15, however, tells a different story. Despite the institutional gains of Congress over the past two decades, the average number of approved defense laws and constitutional amendments does not increase meaningfully after any of the three milestones. In fact, it declines slightly — from 7.7 policies/year before 2001 to 5.9 after 2001 and remains roughly flat through the post-2009 and post-2014 periods (with averages of 5.8 and 6, respectively).

The findings offer partial support for Hypothesis 5. Institutional reforms that strengthened did lead to increased agenda-setting activity in

the defense policy area, suggesting a growing willingness among policy-makers to engage with a traditionally neglected domain. However, this engagement did not translate into greater policy output.

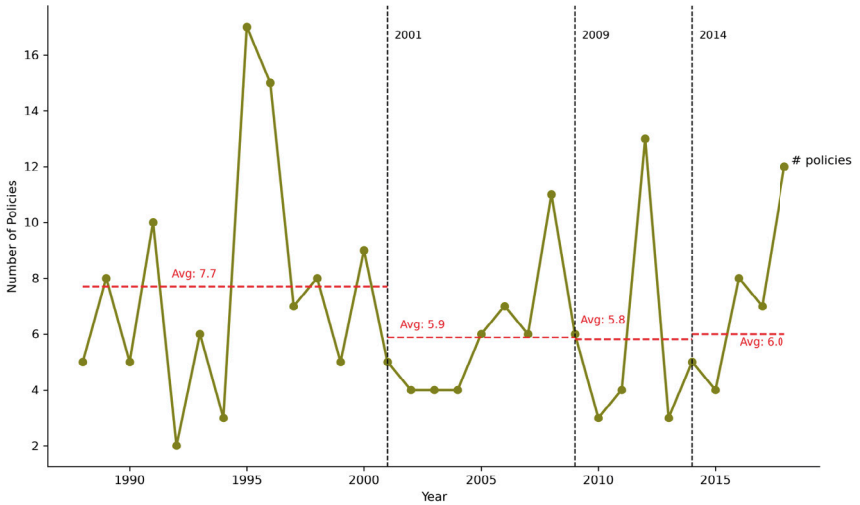


Figure 15 — Number of Defense Laws by Congressional Milestone and Year (1988-2019).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Existing scholarship indicates an attention deficit in Brazil’s defense policy (Pion-Berlin and Trinkunas 2007), suggesting that politicians often treat the area as low priority. However, few studies have systematically assessed the empirical validity of this claim. Key unanswered questions include the degree of attention defense policy receives at the agenda-setting and decision-making stages, whether low salience results in total inaction, which aspects of defense attract attention, and how broader civil-military dynamics have shaped these patterns.

This study tested several hypotheses to evaluate the scope and nature of political engagement with defense policy. Drawing on data from the Brazilian Policy Agendas Project (BPAP), it analyzed the volume of bills and laws, the bill-to-law conversion rate, and the diversity of policy sub-topics over a thirty-year period. The findings confirm that while the number of defense-related policy instruments has increased — particularly after the creation of the Ministry of Defense in 1999 and key institutional reforms in 2001, 2009, and 2014 — this growth did not lead to a corre-

sponding rise in approved legislation. The approval rates for defense bills and constitutional amendments have remained consistently low, highlighting a persistent disconnect between agenda-setting and decision-making.

In addition, defense policy displays a notably lower diversity index compared to other policy areas. Despite increases in policy activity, the content of defense legislation remains narrowly focused on a few subtopics — especially “General” provisions that delegate allocation decisions to the Executive and “Human Resources” concerning military personnel. This concentration reflects a pattern of shallow engagement, in which political actors introduce or process measures without substantially expanding the scope of defense debate.

The study also evaluated whether increased defense budgets stimulated more diverse or substantive legislative activity. The evidence shows no such effect: although defense spending grew significantly from 2000 to 2019, this expansion did not result in greater policy diversity. Similarly, while institutional reforms strengthened Congress’s formal powers, they did not produce a sustained increase in legislative outputs or mitigate the structural neglect of the defense sector. These findings suggest that institutional capacity and fiscal resources alone are insufficient to overcome the political and cognitive frictions that characterize low-salience policy domains.

It is important to emphasize that this study does not distinguish between the origins of policy instruments, whether they are introduced by the Executive, the Legislative, or different chambers within Congress. Rather, it offers a macro-level analysis of political attention to defense policy, treating all proposals, laws, and amendments collectively as indicators of institutional engagement with the sector. As such, the findings point to a broader pattern of neglect — one that likely involves both branches of government. If the Executive consistently prioritizes other policy areas, this may shape congressional behavior and reinforce the marginality of defense within the broader policymaking agenda.

The next step in this research is to disaggregate the data by institutional origin, distinguishing between Executive and Legislative initiatives. This will help clarify whether the attention deficit is driven more by the preferences and behaviors of legislators or by those of the federal government. Further, by identifying the political parties and individual legislators responsible for defense proposals, we can map the sociopolitical drivers of engagement, explore variation within Congress, and better understand the institutional and ideological dynamics that sustain the marginality of defense policy in Brazil’s political system.

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APPENDIX

Table 1
 Defense, Armed Forces, Military, and War Subtopics
 as per the BPAP Codebook

Sub-Code	Description
1600 - General	Issues involving more than one topic among the sub-codes below related to defense policy: National Defense Policy, Border Policy, and National Defense and Security Strategies.
1602 - Alliances, Defense Agreements, and Border	Alliances and military agreements for territorial protection and defense, joint border policies, joint military operations and Armed Forces at borders, military aid, and international military cooperation.
1603 - Intelligence and Espionage	Military intelligence, Armed Forces intelligence, military academies and Armed Forces studies, Barro Branco, ABIN, regulation of military information, secrecy and military documents, and international espionage.
1604 - Operation and Organization of the Armed Forces and Military Capabilities	Oversight, operation, and organizational structure of the Armed Forces. This includes separating the Navy, Air Force, and Army, technological and weaponry capabilities, modernization plans, organizational updates, internal communication systems, and tests and evaluations.
1605 - Arms and Weaponry Control	Control of the possession and sale of firearms, legal age for purchase, firearm possession laws, prohibition and regulation of firearm sales and use, weapons of mass destruction, nuclear weapons, legislation on shooting ranges, shooting practice, uses and types of weaponry, and awareness campaigns on gun ownership.
1606 - International Arms Sales and Military Aid	International sale of weapons from Brazil to other countries, as well as military aid and armed support from Brazil to other nations, including the donation and sale of military equipment such as fighter jets and tanks.
1608 - Human Resources, Careers, and Military Labor	Career and work in the Armed Forces. Military hierarchies, roles, duties, military pensions, assistance programs for military spouses and children, military retirement, bonuses and exemptions for military personnel, pensions for unmarried daughters, compulsory military service, reservists, military work accidents, mandatory examinations, career progression, military downsizing, and military legislation.
1610 - Purchase of Military Equipment, Weapons, and War Supplies	Purchase military equipment, war supplies, firearms, tanks, warships, fighter jets, and other weapons. This includes methods of acquiring military equipment, negotiations, and pricing of arms and supplies for the Armed Forces.

Sub-Code	Description
1611 - Military Facilities and Physical Structure	Expenses and projects for new facilities, closures, decommissioning of installations, bases, and posts, and purchasing and selling buildings, renovations, and facility upgrades. It also covers expanding military bases and UPPs (Pacifying Police Units).
1612 - Military Reservists	Activation of reservists and the transfer of officers to paid reserve status before mandatory retirement at age 65. This does not include pensions or housing.
1614 - War and Military Residues	Consequences to the environment after wars, including war residues and the environmental and toxic impacts caused by military materials, weapons, and warfare.
1615 - Collaboration between Defense Sectors (Civil, Military, and Armed Forces)	Actions of mutual collaboration between civil defense sectors (firefighters, civil police, SAMU, rescuers) and the Armed Forces. Operations, expenses, or coordination matters during emergencies, major disasters, and fires.
1616 - Civilian Employment in Military Units	Occupation of positions in military facilities by civilians. Issues related to the employment, hiring, and work regulations of non-military personnel in military operations.
1617 - Defense Contracts Without Weaponry	Purchase and negotiation of defense contracts and acquisition of military services that do not involve weaponry.
1619 - War and War Operations	Armed conflicts and war.
1620 - Reports of Abuses Against the Armed Forces	Human rights violations during wars or misconduct within the Armed Forces, including torture, killings of innocent civilians, or relatives of those involved in war. Complaints against the Armed Forces and war crimes.
1698 - Research and Development on Military and Warfare Matters	Research and development of new weapons, new equipment, warfare research, and war studies.
1699 - Others	Observations related to defense and war that do not fit into any of the categories listed above.

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NOTAS

1. While a detailed discussion of Brazil's transition from dictatorship to democracy falls outside the scope of this study, it is important to acknowledge its lasting impact on civil-military relations. Scholars have shown that the armed forces retained significant institutional autonomy during and after the transition, shaping the constitutional process and maintaining political influence through lobbying and informal channels. Amorim Neto (2012) and Missiati (2019) highlight how this autonomy has limited both legislative and executive control over defense policy. Zaverucha (1994) similarly argues that the military's influence during the drafting of the 1988 Constitution helped institutionalize mechanisms of tutelage that continue to affect civilian oversight.
2. Jones and Baumgartner (2005) examine the connection between increased attention to sectoral policies and subsequent public policy changes in the U.S. They highlight the critical role of information processing — defined as “collecting, assembling, interpreting, and prioritizing signals from the environment” (Jones and Baumgartner 2005, 7) — in setting policy priorities. The authors illustrate how policymakers' attention to policies influences agenda changes, emphasizing that the information they handle is often uncertain and ambiguous. They argue that policymaking dynamics are driven by a politics of attention: when collective attention is minimal, there is little motivation for change, whereas focused attention can lead to significant policy shifts (Brasil and Jones 2020).
3. The bill-to-law conversion rate is a crucial metric as it reflects the ability of policymakers to successfully advance their proposals into enacted legislation.
4. The annual change rate is a widely used metric in policy studies to assess the extent of policy change over time (see, for example, Jones and Baumgartner 2005). This measure is central to analyses conducted by the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP), which collects, organizes, and freely provides access to vast amounts of data on government attention across more than 25 political systems worldwide. By enabling reliable longitudinal comparisons of issue attention, the CAP helps researchers understand political priorities and policy changes across decision-making venues and between nations (Baumgartner, Jones and Bonafont 2022).
5. For example, suppose we compute the index for three periods: 1990-1994, 1995-1999, and 2000-2004. In the first period, the subtopics included Human Resources, General, Technology, and Arms Control, resulting in an index of X . In the second period, the subtopics expanded to include Human Resources, General, Technology, Arms Control, and Technology Acquisition, yielding a higher index of Y (where $Y > X$). In the third period, the subtopics were limited to Human Resources, General, and Technology Acquisition, leading to a lower index of Z (where $Z < X$).

6. This study does not include data on congressional speeches or cross-national comparisons for two main reasons. First, while speeches can be a valuable indicator of issue attention, the current version of the Brazilian Policy Agendas Project does not yet include a complete and systematically coded dataset of legislative speeches for the period analyzed. Second, although the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) provides a common coding framework, the datasets across countries are not always directly comparable due to differences in data coverage.
7. One might argue that, in a country marked by high levels of inequality and located in a peaceful region with no interstate conflict for over a century, the relative neglect of defense policy is desirable and rational. While this is a reasonable assumption, it overlooks a critical dimension of Brazil's institutional reality: the persistent political influence of the armed forces. Moreover, even in the absence of war, defense policy remains central to democratic governance. Civilian control over the military, including oversight of spending, career progression, promotions, and strategic planning, is vital to ensuring that the armed forces do not exceed their institutional role or interfere in political decision-making. The Brazilian case illustrates this point starkly, as the military has continued to assert itself in political matters in both subtle and overt ways throughout the democratic period. Thus, the attention deficit in this area is not merely a reflection of rational prioritization, but potentially a sign of institutional imbalance that demands scrutiny.
8. While it is true that the number of bills and laws varies according to factors such as issue complexity and electoral relevance, it is important to note that, despite defense policy's very low electoral salience, we are dealing with one of the largest budgets in the country. This alone would justify sustained legislative attention. Furthermore, the military's involvement in diverse areas, such as infrastructure, public health, and public administration, adds considerable complexity to the topic, reinforcing the need for oversight and engagement.
9. The Ministry of Defense brings together, under a single institutional umbrella, budgets that were previously allocated directly to each military branch — an arrangement that naturally generates political attention. Furthermore, the ministry lacks a structured and rational civilian bureaucracy capable of organizing and filtering demands. This absence of internal coordination mechanisms may help explain the low volume of legislative output, even in a context where multiple actors could be expected to generate proposals.
10. Between 1988 and 2019, there were 64 constitutional amendment proposals, 2 approved constitutional amendments, 932 bills, and 210 enacted laws related to defense. Although 1 presidential decree was identified, it was excluded from the analysis due to the extremely small N. Among the sub-

topics, general matters ranked third in frequency, accounting for 13.42% of all observations — behind human resources (25.16%) and weapons control (37.07%). However, when it comes to enacted laws, the General subtopic stands out: it accounts for 43.33% of all defense-related legislation, significantly surpassing human resources (24.76%) and weapons control (5.24%).

11. There were insufficient observations for constitutional amendments to calculate the index for this category.

TRACKING THE ATTENTION DEFICIT: DEFENSE POLICY IN BRAZIL'S CONGRESS (1988–2019)

ABSTRACT

This study revisits the concept of “attention deficit” in Brazil’s defense policy by analyzing legislative and executive policies from 1988 to 2019 using data from the Brazilian Policy Agendas Project. Although defense-related proposals have increased over time—particularly after the creation of the Ministry of Defense in 1999 and key congressional reforms—this growth has not translated into higher approval rates or broader policy engagement. Findings reveal a persistent gap between agenda-setting and decision-making: most proposals do not become law, and those that do are concentrated in just a few subtopics, such as general policy and military personnel. The study also assesses whether institutional strengthening in Congress and rising defense budgets have mitigated this deficit. Results show that neither enhanced legislative autonomy nor increased defense spending has led to greater thematic diversity or policy output. Importantly, the analysis captures aggregate political attention to defense without distinguishing between Executive and Legislative authorship, focusing instead on system-level patterns of engagement. The paper concludes that the attention deficit in defense policymaking persists, sustained by weak civilian oversight, institutional inertia, and symbolic rather than substantive engagement.

Keywords: Defense Policy; Policy Agenda; Public Policymaking; Legislative Process; Civil-Military Relations.

RESUMO

Este estudo revisita o conceito de “déficit de atenção” na política de defesa do Brasil ao analisar iniciativas legislativas e executivas entre 1988 e 2019, com base em dados do *Brazilian Policy Agendas Project*. Embora o número de propostas relacionadas à defesa tenha aumentado ao longo do tempo, especialmente após a criação do Ministério da Defesa em 1999 e reformas importantes no Congresso, esse crescimento não se traduziu em maiores taxas de aprovação ou em um engajamento mais amplo com a agenda de defesa. Os resultados revelam uma lacuna persistente entre a definição da agenda e a tomada de decisão: a maioria das propostas não se converte em lei, e as que são aprovadas concentram-se em poucos subtópicos, como política geral e pessoal militar. O estudo também avalia se o fortalecimento institucional do Congresso e o aumento do orçamento de defesa reduziram esse déficit. Os resultados mostram que nem a maior autonomia legislativa nem os gastos elevados com defesa levaram a uma maior diversidade temática ou produção legislativa. Importante destacar que a análise capta a atenção política agregada ao tema da defesa, sem distinguir a autoria entre Executivo e Legislativo, focando em padrões de engajamento no nível do sistema. O artigo conclui que o déficit de atenção na formulação da política de defesa persiste, sustentado por uma fraca supervisão civil, inércia institucional e um engajamento mais simbólico do que substantivo.

Palavras-chave: Política de Defesa; Agenda Política; Formulação de Políticas Públicas; Processo Legislativo; Relação Civil-Militar

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