

Has there been a weakening of environmentalism in Brazil?

Houve um enfraquecimento do ambientalismo no Brasil?

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ABSTRACT

The article aims to discuss negative trends in environmentalism in Brazil over recent decades, particularly within civil society. The main research techniques employed are document analysis and the analysis of secondary data. The primary sources include the World Values Survey (WVS), Google Trends, and records of the creation of Brazilian parliamentary fronts. The findings indicate that Brazil has experienced: a decline in public confidence in the environmental movement; a decrease in the proportion of the population holding membership in environmental organisations; a drop in Google searches related to environmental topics; and reduced electoral success of environmentalist candidates. The discussion highlights that among the causes of this weakening of environmentalism in Brazil are the success of the anti-environmental movement and a shift in social priorities due to economic, political, and public health circumstances. It is also emphasised that these societal trends form part of the contextual backdrop that helps explain the dismantling of environmental policy in Brazil during the Bolsonaro administration (2019–2022).

Keywords: Environmental movement. Civil society. Brazil. Weakening. Dismantling.

RESUMO

O artigo tem como objetivo discutir tendências negativas do ambientalismo no Brasil nas últimas décadas e no âmbito da sociedade civil. As principais técnicas de pesquisa utilizadas são análise de documentos e análise de dados secundários. As principais fontes são: World Values Survey (WVS), Google Trends e listas de criação de frentes parlamentares. Os resultados evidenciam que houve no Brasil: diminuição da confiança da população no movimento ambientalista; diminuição do percentual da população associada a organizações ambientais; diminuição das buscas por temas ambientais no Google; e diminuição do sucesso eleitoral de candidaturas ambientalistas. A discussão dos resultados enfatiza que entre as causas desse enfraquecimento do ambientalismo no Brasil estão o sucesso do movimento antiecológico e mudanças dos focos prioritários de interesse social em virtude da conjuntura econômica, política e sanitária. Também é destacado que essas tendências societárias compõem o contexto conjuntural explicativo do desmantelamento da política ambiental no governo Bolsonaro (2019-2022).

Palavras-chave: Movimento ambientalista. Sociedade Civil. Brasil. Enfraquecimento. Desmantelamento.

1 INTRODUCTION

In Brazil's most recent federal legislative elections, held in 2022, two prominent figures in Brazilian environmentalism were elected to the Chamber of Deputies representing the state of São Paulo—the country's largest electoral district. Marina Silva, former Minister of the Environment under the Lula administrations (2003–2008), current Minister of the Environment and Climate Change in the third Lula government (2023–present), and a long-standing national environmentalist icon, was elected with 237,521 votes. Ricardo Salles, former Minister of the Environment under the Bolsonaro administration (2019–2021) and a key figure in the dismantling of Brazil's environmental policy framework, was elected with 640,918 votes.

The former minister who spearheaded the dismantling of Brazil's environmental state apparatus thus received 2.7 times more votes than the former minister who led the policy that achieved the greatest reduction in greenhouse gas emissions in recorded global history. This stark contrast in the electoral success of two antithetical candidates is illustrative of broader transformations experienced by Brazilian civil society and political institutions in recent decades.

Brazil has ceased to be a global reference in the fight against climate change and has instead become the country of environmental dismantling, of the government that sought to “let the herd through” (“passar a boiada”). How was this possible? What societal changes might help explain this political shift and the current environmental context in Brazil?

It is within this problematic that the present article is situated. Its aim is to discuss certain negative trends affecting environmentalism within Brazilian civil society over recent decades, supporting the hypothesis that environmentalism in Brazil has undergone a process of weakening.

This article is structured in six sections, including the introduction and the concluding remarks. Section 2 offers a brief review of the literature on the dismantling of environmental policy during the Bolsonaro administration, as well as the historical trajectory of the environmental movement in Brazil. Section 3 presents the main research techniques and sources of data used in the analysis. In Section 4, key indicators of weakening in the Brazilian environmental movement are presented and characterised. Section 5, preceding the final considerations, discusses these findings with the aim of interpreting the processes underway in the country, as well as their causes and consequences.

2 THE DISMANTLING OF BRAZILIAN ENVIRONMENTAL POLICY AND THE HISTORY OF ENVIRONMENTALISM IN BRAZIL

There is consensus in the literature on environmental conflicts in Brazil that the Bolsonaro administration (2019–2022) represents a turning point in the history of the country's environmental policy. The main conceptual and terminological framework used to analyse this period is that of “dismantling”, a theme that has been addressed in special issues and editorials of Brazil's leading academic journals (Barbosa *et al.*, 2022; Bronz; Zhouri; Castro, 2020; Capelari; Milhorange; Araújo, 2023; Paz *et al.*, 2022).

The journal *Sustainability in Debate*, for example, published a special issue in 2023 entitled “Dismantling of Brazilian Environmental Policy”, whose editorial defines “dismantling”, based on Bauer *et al.* (2012), as “a type of change that reduces the number of policies or policy instruments and/or decreases their intensity”. According to the editors, the Bolsonaro government was responsible for “the weakening or dismantling of various social, rural, health, education and environmental policies” (Capelari; Milhorange; Araújo, 2023, p. 23).

Beyond special issues and editorials, a number of studies have examined this topic. They show that during the Bolsonaro administration (2019–2022), Brazil experienced: a reduction in funding allocated

to state institutions responsible for environmental protection; a drop in the number of inspections and fines issued by those institutions; a suspension of the creation of new protected areas; censorship and persecution of public servants; verbal attacks against Indigenous peoples and non-governmental organisations; and an increase in deforestation (Bonelli; Fernandes; Cavalcanti, 2023; Drummond; Capelari; Barros, 2022; Fonseca *et al.*, 2023; Fonseca; Lindoso; Bursztyn, 2023; Milhorange, 2022; Moulin, 2023; Rajão *et al.*, 2021; Silva; Rivas; Uema, 2020; Werneck *et al.*, 2021).

A key contribution in this body of literature is the article by Capelari *et al.* (2020), which draws on the Advocacy Coalition Framework (ACF) to explain the changes brought about under Bolsonaro. According to the authors, four competing coalitions of advocacy exist within Brazil's environmental policy subsystem, each with a well-defined belief system: enlightened technocrats, socio-environmentalists, modern developmentalists, and traditional developmentalists. The traditional developmentalists oppose environmental policy instruments and protected areas, advocate for state support of private enterprise, and adopt a utilitarian view of natural resources. They are "successors of a legacy of the agro-export model, marked by land concentration (natural resources), the use of slave labour, and political conservatism". With Bolsonaro's election, they became dominant in the environmental policy subsystem (Capelari *et al.*, 2020, p. 1695–1697).

The cited literature outlines many of the key trends and developments of the 2010s. The main analytical focus lies on political institutions and the mechanisms through which environmental policy in Brazil was subject to processes of deinstitutionalisation. However, for a more comprehensive understanding of the historical process that led to such a profound transformation in Brazil's environmental reality, certain aspects remain underexplored, particularly regarding civil society.

Since the colonial period, Brazil has witnessed circulating critiques of deforestation and disorderly land occupation, leading Pádua (2002) to argue that a tradition of environmental critique existed in slaveholding Brazil and persisted through the imperial period. This tradition, driven by a small elite, was characterised by a political, anthropocentric, and scientific approach. Its most prominent figure was José Bonifácio (1763–1838), whose writings remain relevant today.

Similarly, during the so-called Brazilian First Republic (1889–1930), intellectuals engaged in environmental discussions, among them Alberto Torres (1865–1917), one of the most respected figures of his time on the national stage. However, these elite-driven initiatives had little political impact.

In the 1930s, Brazil saw the emergence of its first organisations dedicated to environmental issues, notably the *Sociedade dos Amigos das Árvores* (Society of Friends of the Trees), founded in Rio de Janeiro in 1931. These entities' political engagement contributed significantly to the development of Brazil's initial environmental regulations, such as the 1934 Forest Code and the 1934 Brazilian Water Code (Andrade Júnior, 2023; Dean, 1996; Franco; Drummond, 2009).

In the following decades, more organisations were established, albeit still limited in number and geographic spread. A standout was the *Fundação Brasileira para a Conservação da Natureza* (FBCN, Brazilian Foundation for Nature Conservation), founded in 1958 in Rio de Janeiro and regarded as the most active conservationist organisation in subsequent decades. The FBCN played a key role in the legislative process that culminated in the 1965 Brazilian Forest Code (Franco; Drummond, 2009).

On the international stage, the 1972 Stockholm Conference was the first major milestone in what Wagner Costa Ribeiro called the "international environmental order", expressed through agreements and treaties aiming to manage environmental issues beyond national borders (Ribeiro, 2001). As this international order gained strength, pressure increased on national governments to adopt pro-environmental measures.

In the 1980s, amid Brazil's political transition and influenced by international trends, the country experienced an environmentalist transition, with a significant rise in the visibility and relevance of ecological agendas. Within civil society, this period saw a considerable expansion in the number and political influence of environmental organisations, including the founding of *SOS Mata Atlântica* and *Funatura – Fundação Pró-Natureza* (Pró-Nature Foundation), both in 1986.

This period also marked the incorporation of environmental rhetoric into the territorial claims of various social groups, especially Indigenous peoples such as the Kayapó, and traditional communities such as rubber tappers (Andrade Júnior, 2021, 2020). With this environmentalisation of social struggles, a division that persists today in Brazilian environmentalism became more pronounced, between conservationist and socio-environmentalist groups. Broadly, the conservationist camp takes an “ecocentric” perspective, prioritising the preservation of nature and ecosystems in a strict sense, often with a negative view of human presence. The socio-environmentalist perspective, by contrast, adopts an *anthropocentric* approach, advocating for the protection of nature and ecosystems in a broader sense, with a positive valuation of low-impact human presence.

From the late 1980s onward, Brazil witnessed a process of professionalisation and institutionalisation of environmental organisations, including increasing collaboration with state institutions and private companies (Viola; Leis, 1992). This process continued throughout the 1990s and 2000s, characterised by growing institutional formalisation, technical specialisation, and a focus on project management. These developments occurred across both conservationist and socio-environmentalist groups. Cooperative and negotiated strategies became dominant, while confrontational and protest-based actions became marginal (Alonso; Maciel, 2010).

During the 1990s and 2000s, environmental organisations continued to grow in number and spread across Brazil's states. Key institutions in contemporary Brazilian environmentalism emerged during this time, such as the Instituto Socioambiental (Socioenvironmental Institute) in 1994 and the Brazilian branch of Greenpeace in 1991.

Between the 1980s and 2000s, the institutionalisation of environmental protection in Brazil reached its peak. This period saw the adoption of the country's most significant environmental legislation, including the National Environmental Policy (Federal Law No. 6.938/1981), the 1988 Federal Constitution, the Environmental Crimes Law (Federal Law No. 9.605/1998), the National System of Conservation Units (Federal Law No. 9.985/2000), and the National Policy on Climate Change (Federal Law No. 12.187/2009). All of these – except for the National Environmental Policy, which predates Brazil's redemocratisation – were passed with strong participation from civil society in the legislative process (Andrade Júnior, 2020).

The 1990s and 2000s also saw the creation of key state institutions for environmental protection, such as the Ministry of the Environment, the Brazilian Institute for the Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (Ibama, Brazilian Environmental Federal Agency), and the Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity Conservation (ICMBio, another Brazilian Environmental Federal Agency, responsible for the management of Conservation Units). In addition, this period saw the implementation of major environmental policies, including the demarcation of Indigenous lands, the creation of conservation units (in Brazil, this is how environmental protection territories such as national parks are designated), and the Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Deforestation in the Legal Amazon (PPCDAm), responsible for qualifying the fight against deforestation in this biome.

Environmental civil society organisations played a pivotal role in all political processes leading to the creation and implementation of these policies and institutions. The institutionalisation of Brazil's environmental policy can therefore only be understood within the broader context of the progressive strengthening of the Brazilian environmental movement (Andrade Júnior, 2020, 2024).

If the strengthening of the environmental movement was essential for the construction of Brazil's environmental policy, could it be that something negative occurred within civil society environmentalism in the country, something that might help explain the dismantling that took place during the Bolsonaro administration?

3 MATERIALS AND METHODS

The main research techniques employed in this study are document analysis and the analysis of secondary data. The primary sources are: (a) public opinion surveys conducted in Brazil by the World Values Survey (WVS); (b) Google Trends, a platform that tracks and quantifies searches conducted on Google; and (c) subscription lists for the establishment of the Environmentalist Parliamentary Front and the Agricultural Parliamentary Front in the Brazilian National Congress.

The World Values Survey (WVS) is an international research programme dedicated to the scientific study of social, political, economic, and cultural values across the world. Its main research tool is a comparative survey conducted every five years at the global level.

This article draws on data from two questions included in WVS waves 2 (1994–1998), 5 (2005–2009), 6 (2010–2014), and 7 (2017–2022). In Brazil, these surveys were carried out in 1997, 2006, 2014, and 2018, respectively.

The first question analysed concerns the Brazilian population's confidence in the environmental movement (referred to as the "environmental protection movement" in the WVS data documentation). The second question relates to the population's active or inactive membership in environmental organisations, or lack of affiliation ("active" or "inactive" "membership of environmental organisation", according to the documentation).

Google Trends, in turn, is a platform that provides information on searches conducted by users around the world through Google. Since 2004, Google has recorded and quantified the search terms used in a representative sample of user queries on its platform. This sampling is conducted across all regions of the world, enabling data to be presented for different territorial scopes.

These data are anonymous, categorised, and aggregated by Google, and are always presented in relative terms, proportional to the total number of searches at a given time and place. Thus, absolute figures are not provided. Instead, the data express the frequency of each search term as a proportion of all queries made during the corresponding period.

The use of Google Trends data to discuss behavioural trends in relation to environmental protection has been the subject of academic debate over the past decade. Scholars have taken opposing views, with some criticising the use of such data (Ficetola, 2013; Nghiem *et al.*, 2016) and others defending its validity (McCallum; Bury, 2013; McCallum; Bury, 2014; Proulx; Massicotte; Pépino, 2013; Troumbis, 2017). Despite the controversy, the prevailing view has been favourable to the use of such data, as long as there is an appropriate choice of terms used as indicators.

In Brazil, the use of Google Trends as a data source for scientific research across diverse topics has grown considerably. Nevertheless, caution is particularly necessary in the Brazilian case, given the significant transformations in internet access and usage patterns in the country since 2004. Among the main changes, there has been a substantial increase in internet access usage by the general population, especially among people with lower levels of education and income, which has implications both quantitatively and qualitatively for internet use (Núcleo de Informação e Coordenação do Ponto BR, 2020).

In this study, I present the historical evolution of Google searches conducted in Brazil between 1 January 2004 and 31 December 2020 for ten terms considered representative of key contemporary themes and issues related to nature protection. These terms, listed alphabetically, are: *Amazônia* (Amazon), *aquecimento global* (global warming), *biodiversidade* (biodiversity), *desenvolvimento sustentável* (sustainable development), *desmatamento* (deforestation), *ecologia* (ecology), *meio ambiente* (environment), *poluição* (pollution), *saneamento básico* (basic sanitation), and *vegetação* (vegetation). The selection of terms was based on analyses of international research and topics highlighted in public opinion surveys on environmental issues. Data extraction and organisation were conducted between August and October 2022.

Finally, the lists of signatories for the establishment of the Environmentalist Parliamentary Front and the Agricultural Parliamentary Front are formal, public documents related to two parliamentary formal groups that are typically positioned on opposite sides of legislative disputes over environmental issues in Brazil (Araújo; Silva, 2016; Cascione, 2018; Ferreira, 2019). The Environmentalist Parliamentary Front has traditionally led efforts to pass laws aimed at strengthening environmental protection, while the Agricultural Parliamentary Front has typically promoted legislation that reduces such protections.

Although these lists do not provide a precise measure of the number of parliamentarians who actively participate in the meetings and actions of each front, as emphasised in the literature (Araújo; Silva, 2016; Cascione; Araújo, 2019; Cascione, 2018; Ferreira, 2019), they nonetheless serve as a meaningful indicator of how many members of Congress were willing to align themselves with the agendas typically promoted by each thematic front at the start of their terms in office.

In this context, the number of parliamentarians who subscribed to the request to establish the Environmentalist Parliamentary Front is taken here as an indicator of the electoral success of candidates inclined to support environmental causes. Conversely, the number of signatories to the creation of the Agricultural Parliamentary Front is used as an indicator of the electoral success of candidates predisposed to oppose such causes, given the typical legislative behaviour of the group.

4 RESULTS

The first negative indicator concerning the environmental movement in Brazil comes from the WVS survey on public confidence in the environmental movement. As shown in Figure 1, in 1997, nearly 80% of the Brazilian population reported that they had confidence in the environmental movement either “a great deal” or “quite a lot”. This percentage dropped to 64.4% in 2006, a level that remained stable in 2014. In 2018, a further decline was observed, with only 56.8% of the population responding positively to this question.

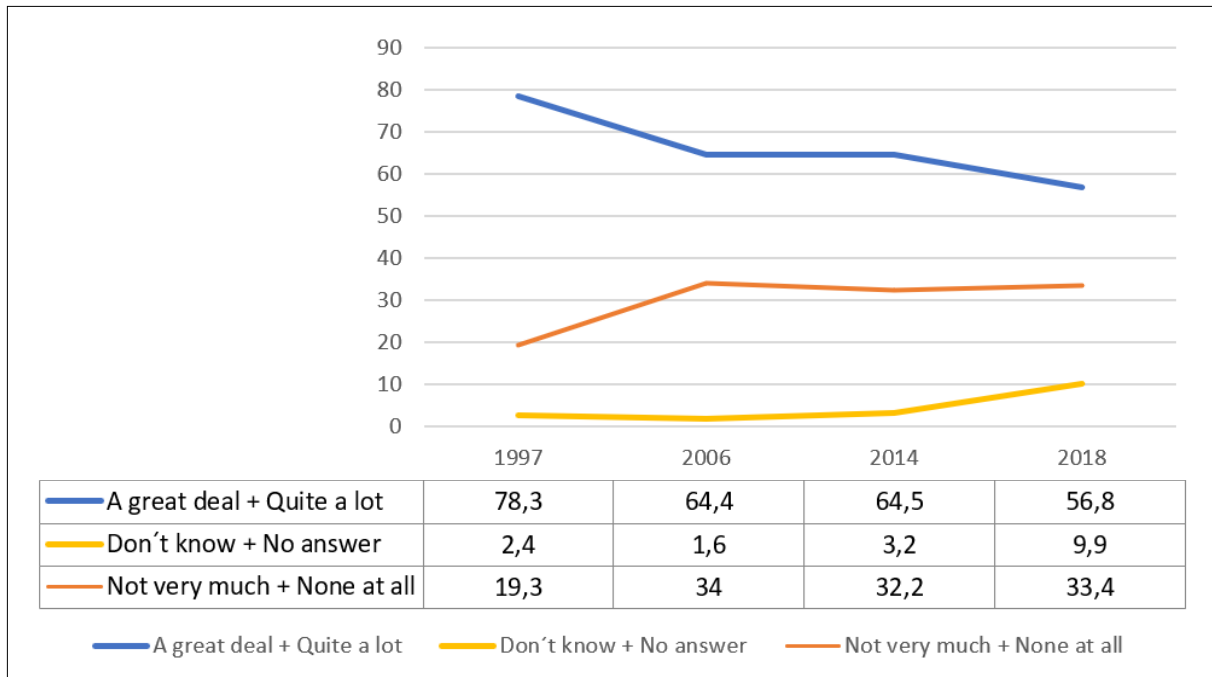


Figure 1 – Confidence in the environmental movement in Brazil – percentage (1997–2018)

Source: World Values Survey (WVS), author's elaboration

The second negative indicator also comes from the WVS, this time concerning membership in environmental organisations in Brazil. As shown in Figure 2, the percentage of individuals who reported being active or inactive members of environmental organisations declined between 1997 and 2018, while the proportion of those stating they were not members increased.

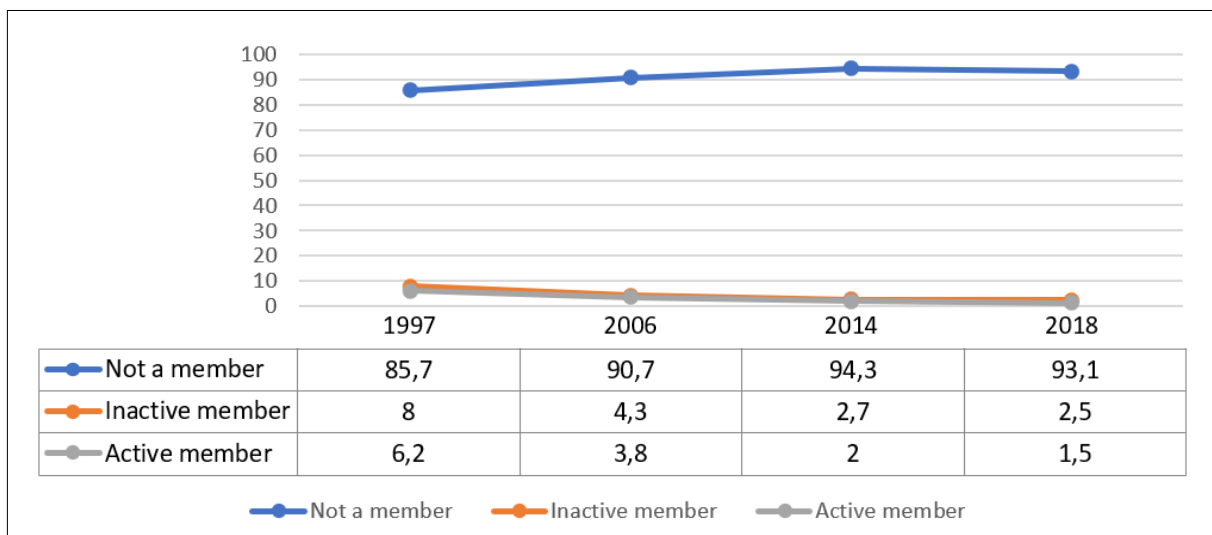


Figure 2 – Membership in environmental organisations in Brazil – percentage (1997–2018)

Source: World Values Survey (WVS), author's elaboration

The third negative indicator comes from Google Trends and refers to search activity by Brazilian users involving terms relevant to environmentalism. Figure 3 presents the results, revealing a downward trend in searches over the observed period, particularly when comparing the initial and final years of the historical series.

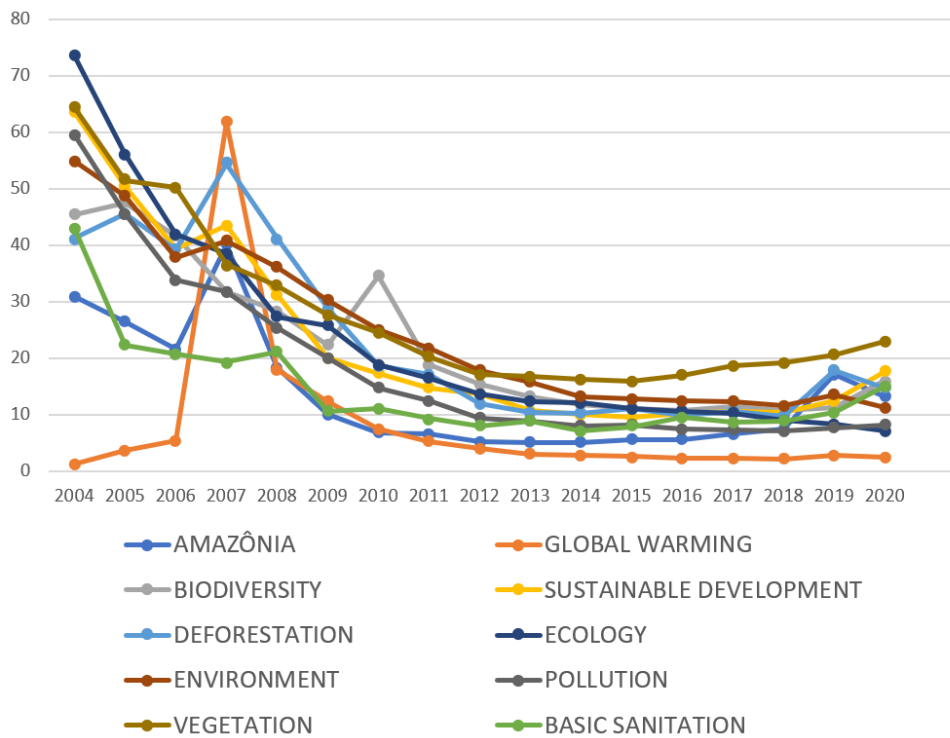


Figure 3 – Google searches on environmental topics in Brazil (2004–2020)

Source: Google Trends, author's elaboration

Below, I present a comparison of the average search interest for each term in 2004 and 2020, showing the percentage increase or decrease over time:

- Amazônia – 30.8 in 2004 and 13.1 in 2020, decrease of 57%;
- Global warming – 1.25 in 2004 and 2.3 in 2020, increase of 84%;
- Biodiversity – 45.4 in 2004 and 16 in 2020, decrease of 64%;
- Sustainable development – 63.5 in 2004 and 17.6 in 2020, decrease of 72.7%;
- Deforestation – 41.1 in 2004 and 14.5 in 2020, decrease of 64%;
- Ecology – 73.5 in 2004 and 7.08 in 2020, decrease of 90.3%;
- Environment – 54.8 in 2004 and 11.1 in 2020, decrease of 79%;
- Pollution – 59.5 in 2004 and 8.1 in 2020, decrease of 86.3%;
- Basic sanitation – 42.91 in 2004 and 15.08 in 2020, decrease of 64.8%;
- Vegetation – 64.4 in 2004 and 23 in 2020, decrease of 64.2%.

Given the expansion of internet access among people with lower educational levels in Brazil between 2004 and 2019, some degree of decline in environmental search interest could be expected. This expectation is based on public opinion surveys conducted in Brazil (Confederação Nacional da Indústria, 2012; Ibope Inteligência, 2021) and abroad (European Commission, 2017), which suggest that environmental concern tends to increase with higher levels of education.

However, the intensity of the decrease in searches for environmental terms, relative to total searches, was far greater than could be expected, generally exceeding 50%. This rules out the idea that the trend can be explained solely by the broader use of the internet by people with lower levels of education. It rather suggests a genuine decline in interest among Brazilian internet users regarding environmental topics between 2004 and 2020.

The fourth negative indicator concerns the number of parliamentarians who signed the requests to establish the Environmentalist Parliamentary Front and the Agricultural Parliamentary Front between the 53rd Brazilian Federal Legislature (2007–2010) and the 57th Brazilian Federal Legislature (2023–2026). This information is presented in Figure 4.

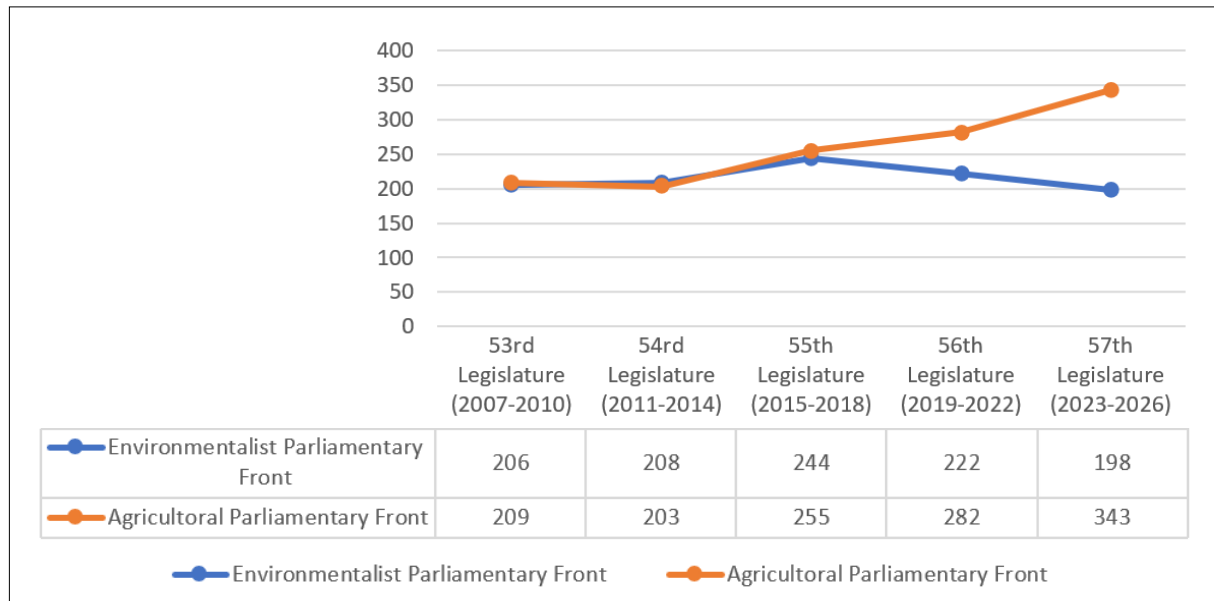


Figure 4 – Number of parliamentarians subscribing to the creation of the Environmentalist and Agricultural Parliamentary Fronts in Brazil (2007–2023)

Source: Brazilian National Congress, author’s elaboration

As shown in the graph, between the 53rd Brazilian Legislature (2007–2010) and the 57th Brazilian Legislature (2023–2026), there was a shift in the number of parliamentarians subscribing to the creation of the two fronts. While the number of signatories to the Agricultural Parliamentary Front steadily increased, the Environmentalist Parliamentary Front saw a reduction in support during the 56th (2019–2022) and 57th (2023–2026) Legislatures.

5 DISCUSSION

In summary, the results presented indicate that in recent decades Brazil has experienced a decline in public confidence in the environmental movement; a decrease in the percentage of the population affiliated with environmental organisations, whether as active or inactive members; a relative reduction in Google searches using terms related to environmental themes; and a shift in the number of parliamentarians subscribing to the creation of the Agricultural and Environmentalist Parliamentary Fronts, with an increase in the former and a reduction in the latter.

This change in the direction of Brazilian environmentalism is striking when compared to the gradual strengthening and the quantitative and qualitative expansion that characterised the historical development of the field during the second half of the twentieth century. In the early twenty-first

century, the weakening of environmentalism in Brazil is underway. This national trend parallels patterns identified by public opinion surveys and academic literature in other parts of the world.

The same World Values Survey (WVS) that underpinned the data presented in the previous section also shows that the decline in confidence in the environmental movement and the reduction in environmental associativism observed in Brazil are likewise occurring in other countries. Russia, Mexico, and several South American countries, including Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Uruguay, are examples of societies in which positive responses regarding confidence in the environmental protection movement fell between Wave 2 (1990–1994) and Wave 7 (2017–2022) of the survey (World Values Survey, 2024). On the other hand, countries such as China, India, Indonesia, and the United States recorded an increase in positive responses concerning confidence in the environmental protection movement over the same period (World Values Survey, 2024).

Regarding affiliation to environmental organisations, WVS data also indicate a decrease in the number of active and inactive members among national populations between Wave 2 (1990–1994) and Wave 7 (2017–2022) in the United States and Mexico (World Values Survey, 2024). Stable levels of membership, within the margin of error, were recorded in Argentina, Chile, China, and Russia. Growth in environmental organisations' membership during the same period was observed in India, Colombia, and Uruguay (World Values Survey, 2024).

Lou *et al.* (2022) conducted a meta-analysis of scientific studies assessing environmental concern through the “New Environmental Paradigm”, a globally adopted framework for analysing environmental attitudes. Based on 184 studies across various continents, the authors concluded that there was a global decline in environmental concern between 1994 and 2017.

Oliveira, Carneiro, and Vecchia (2017), in turn, analysed global search trends on climate change and global warming using Google data from 2004 to 2017. They concluded that public interest in climate issues reduced globally after two peaks in 2007 and 2009.

With regard to explanations for these negative environmental trends across different regions of the world, the literature suggests two main causal arguments: economic and political.

According to the economic argument, reductions in support, declining environmental concern, and/or the weakening of environmentalism are the result of negative economic conditions in society, which lead to shifts in social priorities away from environmental issues.

The political argument, in contrast, attributes such outcomes to the success of actions, campaigns, and strategies promoted by social groups opposed to environmental protection, who have an interest in maintaining environmentally harmful practices.

A concrete example of the economic argument is the study by Scruggs and Benegal (2012), who investigated declining public concern about climate change in the United States. They concluded that the main driver was the economic recession and the fragility of the labour market. According to the authors, fluctuations in public interest in environmental issues correspond to changes in economic conditions, with lower concern during crises, when basic subsistence needs take priority. They also cite evidence from European countries that, in their view, supports the economic explanation for the reduction of climate concern.

A concrete example of the political argument is offered by the articles of McCright and Dunlap. In several publications, the authors characterise what they call a “coordinated anti-environmental countermovement”, led by “conservative foundations, think tanks, and politicians”, which emerged in reaction to global environmentalism, perceived as a threat to neoliberal economic policies (McCright; Dunlap, 2011). They argue that the rise of anti-environmental positions among conservatives and

Republicans in the United States and the resulting increase in climate polarisation, are outcomes of the political actions of this “anti-environmental countermovement”, active in the United States since the 1990s (McCright; Xiao; Dunlap, 2014, p. 258).

In Brazil, there is evidence supporting the plausibility of both the economic and political arguments for explaining the weakening of environmentalism, particularly in the 2010s, when the dismantling of the country’s environmental policy, as described in the literature, effectively took place.

Between 2011 and 2020, Brazil recorded an average annual GDP growth of just 0.26%, the lowest since national economic data began to be collected in 1901. Meanwhile, unemployment increased significantly over the decade, rising from 7.9% in the first quarter of 2012 to 13.9% in the final quarter of 2020, according to the National Household Sample Survey (Pnad, one of the main Brazilian economic surveys) conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE, Brazilian census bureau). As a result, a significant portion of the population was left without the minimum means for subsistence.

This economic shift is reflected in public opinion surveys conducted by Ibope (one of the most important Brazilian research institutes at the time) on Brazil’s most pressing problems, in which “unemployment” gained prominence. In 2012 and 2014, it ranked only 10th and 11th, respectively, but by 2017 and 2019 it had reached 1st place, cited by 56% and 47% of respondents (National Confederation of Industry, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2020).

To the economic argument, one may also add the health component as an explanatory factor for the reorientation of social priorities to the detriment of environmental concerns in Brazil in recent years. Public health issues remained highly prominent throughout the 2011–2020 period in Brazil, a situation further aggravated by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. In Ibope surveys, “health” was consistently among the five most cited issues by Brazilians, ranking first and second in 2018 and 2019, respectively.

In this context, it is reasonable to argue that during a decade of extremely low economic growth, rising unemployment, and ongoing public dissatisfaction with health conditions, the Brazilian population shifted its focus to more urgent matters, resulting in reduced attention to environmental issues and a diminished presence of these topics on the national agenda.

As for the political argument, evidence supporting its plausibility in Brazil is also found in the academic literature.

Zhour (2022), for example, examined documents, news articles, and public statements from military personnel and politicians in Brazil’s northern region to demonstrate the historical roots of anti-environmental positions in Brazilian society, particularly from the 1980s onwards. According to her, anti-environmentalism is a constitutive element of Brazilian history.

Massarani *et al.* (2024, p. 36), in turn, analysed climate denialist messages shared on the Telegram platform between 2017 and 2023. They found that these messages, which employ tactics and techniques typical of climate denialism in other parts of the world, have had “a significant impact on public perceptions of climate change and on government action” in Brazil.

Like these two studies, other scientific research in Brazilian academic literature contribute to identifying and characterising an anti-environmental movement – or countermovement – within the country (Acselrad, 2022; Pinheiro, 2022; Vasques, 2021), helping to link the actions of such groups to the weakening of environmentalism.

Nevertheless, in the Brazilian case, both the economic and political explanatory frameworks still require further qualitative and quantitative research in order to deepen our understanding of the causes behind the weakening of environmentalism in the country.

6 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The weakening of Brazilian environmentalism has already been noted by prominent analysts of the country's environmental politics. Drummond, Capelari, and Barros (2022, p. 15), for instance, argue that since the 2010s, both conservationist and socio-environmentalist groups have experienced political and social weakening in Brazil. This article contributes to the discussion by presenting a broader set of data, as well as by offering comparisons and causal reflections.

In the final considerations, it is important to emphasise that recognising this weakening does not diminish the crucial role played by environmental organisations, social movements, and activists in resisting the dismantling of Brazilian environmental policy and the authoritarian and destructive initiatives of the Bolsonaro government. These actors were fundamental in preventing the national scenario from deteriorating even further between 2019 and 2022.

However, it is equally important to underline that the dismantling of Brazil's environmental policies under Bolsonaro cannot be fully understood without acknowledging the observed weakening of environmentalism in the country. This weakening forms part of the broader contextual conditions that made environmental dismantling possible. In a different scenario, one in which environmentalism held greater political strength both nationally and internationally, the Brazilian anti-environmental movement would likely not have succeeded.

Finally, it must be stressed that the negative findings presented in this article are deeply concerning. The world is experiencing an escalation of socio-environmental collapse, and we are now within the decisive decade for implementing structural transformations in our energy and food systems, in order to enhance our chances of adapting to the new climate regime (Marques, 2023).

Despite this, Brazil has witnessed a weakening of environmentalism over the past decades. It will not be possible to promote the political changes necessary for climate mitigation and adaptation if these social trends persist. It is urgent that Brazilian environmentalism regains its strength.

NOTES

1 | A study conducted by the Union of Concerned Scientists analysed Brazil's environmental policies during the 2000s and concluded that the country had achieved "the largest reductions in deforestation and [greenhouse gas] emissions anywhere in the world" (Boucher *et al.*, 2014). Marina Silva was the minister responsible for leading the Action Plan for the Prevention and Control of Deforestation in the Legal Amazon (PPCDAm), which was the main driver behind this achievement.

2 | This is a reference to the well-known remark made by then-Minister Ricardo Salles on 22 April 2020, during a meeting between President Jair Bolsonaro and his senior ministers. In his statement, "let the herd through" ("deixar a boiada passar") referred to advancing the process of administrative deregulation of environmental policies, taking advantage of the general social demobilisation brought about by the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic.

3 | Further information is available at https://support.google.com/trends/answer/4365533?hl=pt-BR&ref_topic=6248052.

4 | People who did not respond accounted for 1.1% of the total in 2006 and 0% in the other years, while those who reported not knowing represented 1.1% in 2014 and 2.9% in 2018. These response options were excluded from Figure 2 to improve visual clarity.

5 | These contextual phenomena of the 2010–2020 decade are essential for understanding the negative trends observed in Brazilian environmentalism during this period, and they form part of the causal explanation for the dismantling of environmental policy under the Bolsonaro administration. However, the data on confidence in the environmental movement and environmental membership in Brazil show a noticeable decline that predates this decade, which calls for a specific explanation that is beyond the scope of this article.

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