



Declining Role of the Parliament

by

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INTRODUCTION

13 May 1952: The watershed event of Indian democracy; the constitution bestowed the Parliament with its powers, resulting in its inception. The constituent assembly determined a parliamentary form of government, republican in nature and quasi-federal in structure inspired by Westminster Britain. This unique characteristic of the parliamentary system sets it apart, aspiring to be a “link between the Executive, the Legislative and the Judiciary”, as Professor K T Shah rightly mentions in the Constituent Assembly Debates. The founding fathers also believed the Parliament would become the decisive authoritative force representing the masses, holding the executive power accountable for their actions and protecting the ideals of the universal adult franchise.

Article 79 of the Indian Constitution defines that “the Council of the Parliament consists of the president and the two houses known as the Council of States (Rajya Sabha) and the House of People (Lok Sabha)” (National Informatics Centre, n.d.). The efficiency of the parliament can be evaluated directly by the frequency of the parliamentary procedures, such as the number of sittings and MPs’ active participation in question hours, zero hours, and parliamentary debates. However, there is “a general sense that the procedural norms that are the basis of parliamentary practice began to erode, particularly after the mid-1970s” (Kapur et al., 2006). According to the EPW Editorials (2009), the weakening of the parliament gives rise to a disproportionate power in other institutions, toppling the system of checks and balances and creating distortions that ultimately destroy the system's roots.

With the parliament marking its 74th institutional year, it is imperative that the civilians actively participate in the legislative processes, differentiating between vote-hungry populist policies and the actual development discourse in the country discerning their power. Because a democratic government is “of the people by the people and for the people”. Therefore, this article attempts to analyse the institution's role burdened with the idea of the “declining parliament” in an evidence-based study.

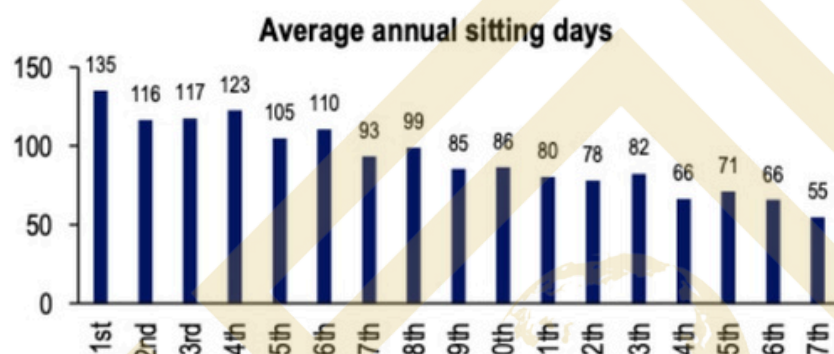
HOW DO WE KNOW THE PRODUCTIVITY IS DECLINING?

“An obvious measure of effective working of Parliament is the number of days it sits and the amount of business it transacts”(EPW Editorials, 2009). The businesses include legislative procedures like passing bills, active working of the individual parliament, and individual MP involvement, to name a few. “On both counts, the performance of India’s Parliament is becoming

increasingly deficient”(EPW Editorials, 2009). The following sections attempt to analyse the data from the past three Lok Sabha sessions to evaluate its productivity over the years.

The 17th Lok Sabha session was held between June 2019- February 2024, working only 88% of its scheduled time. The PRS noted that this term was the fewest sittings in all full-term Lok

Sabha history, with only 274 sittings. The fewest sittings were recorded in 2020, with 33 days during the COVID-19 pandemic. 11 out of the 15 sessions were adjourned early, resulting in the 40 scheduled sittings(13% of the scheduled sittings) not taking place. This was also the first time the Lok Sabha had not

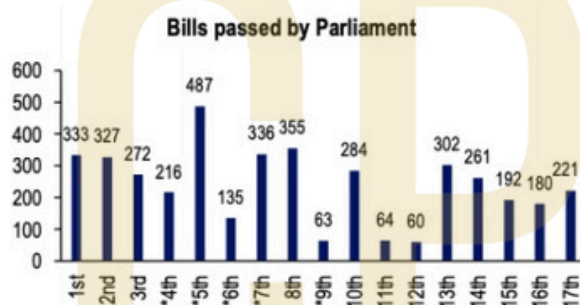


Note: * indicates a term less than five years; ** indicates a six year term.

elected a deputy speaker for its entire duration (2019-2024), neglecting Article 93 of the Constitution, which states that the Lok Sabha elects a Speaker and a Deputy Speaker ‘as soon as may be’(Vital Stats, PRS, n.d.).

During the 17th Lok Sabha, MPs were suspended substantively across both Houses of Parliament. In Winter Session 2023 alone, 146 MPs were suspended for serious misconduct in the House. Important legislation, like the bills to reform the three criminal laws, was passed with several MPs missing from the House due to suspension.

179 Bills were passed, out of which 58% were passed within 2 weeks of introduction, indicating the lack of quality deliberations on crucial matters, further underlining the inefficiency of the parliament.

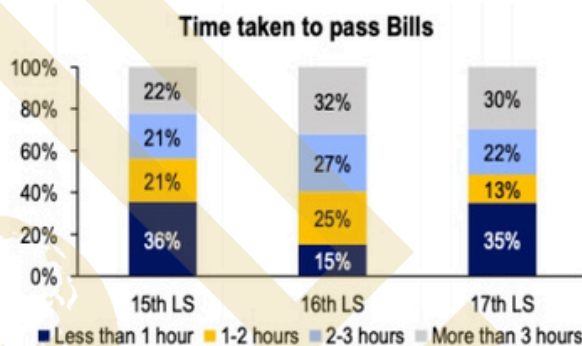


Note: * indicates a term less than five years; ** indicates a six-year term.
This figure includes Finance and Appropriation Bills.

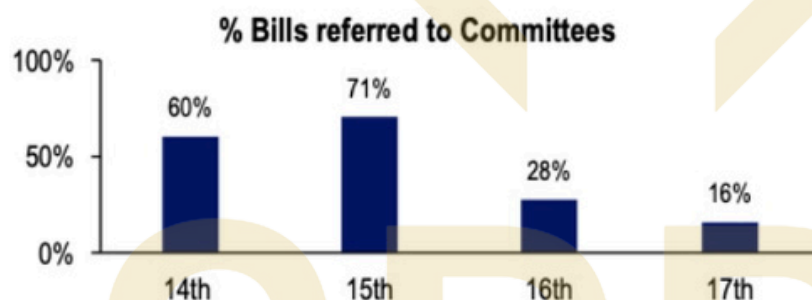
“The Ministries of Finance and Home Affairs piloted the highest number of Bills (15% each), followed by Law and Justice (9%) and Health and Family Welfare (9%). Key Bills like the Women’s Reservation Bill, 2023; the J&K Reorganisation Bill, 2019; the Appointment of CEC Bill, 2023; three Labour Codes, the Digital Data Protection Bill, 2023; three Farm laws (which were later repealed); Three Bills replacing the IPC, 1860, the CrPC, 1973, and

the Indian Evidence Act, 1872 were passed” (Vital Stats, PRS, n.d.).

The graph below shows Lok Sabha's time to approve a bill during the 15th, 16th and 17th sessions. 35% and 36% of the bills were passed within less than an hour of introduction in the 15th and 17th sessions, respectively. In the 15th Lok Sabha, 36% of the total Bills passed were debated for less than thirty minutes. Of these, 20 Bills were passed in less than five minutes. “Debates are not just formal discussions on bills, party lines or otherwise. They help clarify the legislative intent for the benefit of the people and the future. Whenever a legislation's actual meaning and implications are in doubt, the debate in Parliament on the bill should serve as a guide to its interpretation”(EPW Editorials, 2009). Legislation passed in a hurry without a discussion offers no guidance or sets the context, resulting in unwanted outliers and unaccountable exercise of power.



According to PRS, Parliament deliberates on complex matters and needs technical expertise to understand such issues better. Hence, Parliamentary Committees are established to help with this by providing a forum where Members can engage with domain experts and government officials during their study. Committees also provide a forum for building consensus across political parties.

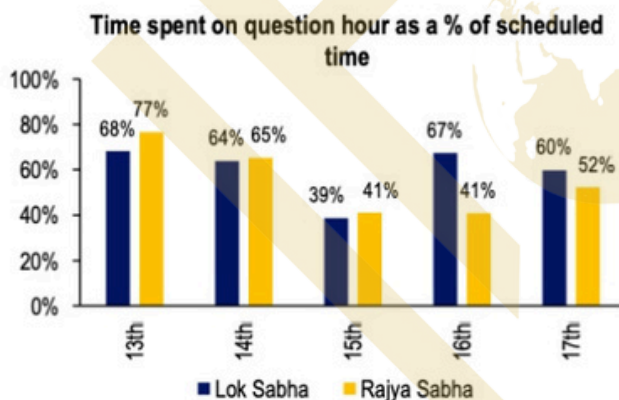


However, there have been several instances where the standing committees were relegated to the sideline, reducing them to the inactive decorations of the Parliament. PRS analysis shows that only 16% of bills

were referred to committees for detailed scrutiny, the lowest percentage among the last three Lok Sabha. Similarly, about 80% of the budget has been voted on without discussion between 2019 and 2023. In 2018 and 2023, the entire budget was passed without debate. “On average, Committees held nine meetings to finalise reports on Bills. Apart from the Data Protection Bill, only the Biological Diversity (Amendment) Bill 2021 was discussed in at least 15 meetings. The three Bills to reform criminal laws were examined together over 12 meetings” (*Vital Stats*, PRS, n.d.).

The PRS noted that a significant majority of bills were passed during the 17th Lok Sabha session without recorded voting. 9% of Bills were passed with at least one instance of recorded voting (including voting on amendments and passing of Bills). This figure was roughly the same during

the 16th and 15th Lok Sabhas.” Four Bills are set to lapse with the dissolution of this Lok Sabha. This is the lowest number among all Lok Sabhas so far. Bills that will lapse include the Inter-State River Water Disputes (Amendment) Bill, 2019, Prohibition of Child Marriage (Amendment) Bill, 2021, and the Electricity (Amendment) Bill, 2022” (*Vital Stats*, PRS, n.d.). Private Members' Bills are bills introduced by MPs who are not part of the government, often perceived as behind-the-scenes contributors to the legislation. However, the number of Private Members' Bills being introduced and passed in parliament has declined in recent years. According to data from PRS Legislative Research, only two Private Members' Bills were passed in the 16th Lok Sabha, compared to 14 in the previous Lok Sabha. None have been passed in both Houses since 1970. These numbers indicate the dire condition of the individual parliament as these motions are not prioritised or given due importance, discouraging participation.



According to Rauscompass. (2025), another crucial aspect of parliamentary productivity is the ability of MPs to ask questions and scrutinise the government during Question Hour. Question Hour is also the first hour of every Parliamentary sitting, devoted to MPs' questions to be orally answered by Ministers. However, Question Hour has been disrupted in recent years, especially in the 15th Lok Sabha session, with MPs often protesting and preventing the House from functioning; “according to an analysis by

IndiaSpend, the 16th Lok Sabha lost 29% of its scheduled time due to disruptions, while the current 17th Lok Sabha has lost 48% of its scheduled time”(Rauscompass, 2025). During the 15th Lok Sabha, Question Hour was a major casualty of disruptions, resulting in Lok Sabha losing 61% of the time scheduled for Question Hour, and Rajya Sabha lost 59%.

Since the 1990s, time spent on union budget debates (including ministry-wise allocations) in the Lok Sabha has reduced exponentially, with the annual budget being discussed for 35 hours on average. Between 2019 and 2023, about 80% of the budget has been voted on without discussion. In 2023, the entire budget was passed without debate. This has happened twice in the last decade - in 2018 and 2013.

“The gradual decline of sittings of Parliament and attenuation of parliamentary authority may be attributed to frequent absenteeism, deterioration in the conduct and quality of members, poor levels of participation and the falling standards of debates and legislative business. All these have been exacerbated by frequent parliamentary disruptions leading to logjams” (Dubey & Uttar Pradesh Legislative Assembly, 2018).

Dissent is a critical component of any democracy, and, in that light, disruptions could be seen as a part of established parliamentary practice. Nevertheless, increasing polarization and confrontational politics have led to unrealistic and even undemocratic disruptions, almost becoming the norm, reduced time and valuable resources of the Parliament hindering legislative processes. Another reason is the lack of adequate and quality preparation and deliberation before introducing bills in the parliament. The government often rushes the bill's passing process without thorough discussions, leading to insufficient scrutiny and oversight and poorly drafted legislation that causes insensitivities, delays, and controversies. Moreover, the absence of a robust committee system has reduced the parliament's productivity. "Committees are crucial in scrutinising bills, conducting in-depth research, and engaging in consultations with stakeholders, which help draft effective legislation. However, the committee system in India is weak, resulting in the bypassing of committees and inadequate scrutiny of bills" (Rauscompass, 2025). Furthermore, the lack of diversity in the Indian Parliament, with significant underrepresentation of marginalised and subaltern voices, including women and other minorities, has resulted in non-inclusive policy curation, leading to the passing of legislation that does not reflect the needs and aspirations of all sections of society.

HOW CAN THIS CONDITION BE IMPROVED?

Several countries like Britain have encouraged Parliamentary reforms via their manifestos, debates and discussions,

putting them under the limelight. The Labour Party promises to set up a Modernisation Committee to recommend crucial reforms, "such as reforming the private member's bill procedure or improving the scrutiny of delegated legislation" (EPW, 2024). A structural reform from the electoral level is required to amend the parliamentary behaviour as "the processes that go into the making of Parliament contribute to its composition" (Kapur et al., 2006).

Another solution is to reduce the workload of Parliament by strengthening standing committees as committees have been putting forth the idea of parliamentary reforms. Schedule sittings initially for the year so the MPs can plan their year. The MPs must be mandated to attend a minimum number of sessions backed by "several Committees have recommended that Parliament meet for at least 120 days a year" and a minimum number of questions and private bills to be presented (EPW, 2024).

Two significant challenges in making the parliament are campaign financing and the criminalisation of politics. Raising money for elections hampers many citizens from contesting and reduces politics to special interest, leading to corruption. Many MPs having a criminal background, often with serious charges, could put a shadow on the democratic structure. "Nearly a quarter (23.2 per cent) of the MPs elected in 2004 had criminal cases registered against them"

(Kapur et al., 2006). “Electoral reforms on the eligibility criteria for becoming an MP should be made stricter, including conditions such as minimum educational qualification and no criminal record. The recent judgment of the Supreme Court to disqualify the sitting parliamentarians in case they are convicted of certain offences is a welcome move.”(Gowda, 2023).

- To bring specialised knowledge to policy making, there is a need to offer tickets to candidates with skilled professionals like social activists, lawyers, doctors and academicians.
- “Political parties shall be within the purview of the Right to Information Act to increase transparency in the case of fundraising, agenda setting, distribution of tickets, party elections and their nexus with the corporate world is concerned. This change is more needed when they, too, are consistently rated corrupt by the country's people, as recorded in the 2013 report of Transparency International”(Gowda, 2023).
- There is a requirement to codify the rules and conventions of the parliament, such as decorum, discipline and debate rules and punishments and imposing fines.
- An annual report card including the performance and attendance should be publicised amongst the people of their constituencies for evaluation.
- The right to recall parliamentarians who are not performing sufficiently shall be with the people and protected by the Constitution.
- The position of the Leader of the Opposition must be strengthened in all senses to maintain transparency and accountability.

This rot in the parliamentary system is not unique to India alone but is something democracies worldwide face. Nevertheless, countries like the UK are proactively attempting to reform their institutions innovatively, offering an inspiring model to India. The Parliament is the corner of the Indian democracy, and reforms are due to make this institution a living and dynamic one like our constitution. This flexibility would restore its vitality and public confidence. If neglected, our Parliament risks devolving into a platform for gossip, lacking in substantive policy or legislative outcomes. The solution is not to shock the system by complete restructuring but by implementing incremental changes that augment its functionality and public perception. Therefore, the cure must target the root cause, not the symptoms, as “Democracy can only thrive if its leaders operate with integrity and adhere to principles standards” (Gowda,2023).

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All the graphs and illustrations are sourced from the PRS Legislative Research.

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