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Parliamentary Committees and Their Role in Legislative Scrutiny

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Abstract— Parliamentary committees are the principal mechanism through which legislatures examine bills in detail, consult outside interests, and assess executive proposals before they become law. In India, department-related standing committees were established in 1993 to review the work of ministries and, in certain cases, to examine bills referred to them. This paper analyses how these committees contribute to legislative scrutiny. It combines a review of the procedural and comparative literature with an empirical study of 360 bills referred to standing committees during the 15th and 16th Lok Sabha terms (2009–2019). Each bill was coded for whether its committee report was tabled, whether the report recommended amendments, how the government responded to the recommendations, and the number of days between referral and report. Of the 360 referred bills, 298 (82.8%) received a committee report, and 214 of those reports (71.8%) recommended amendments. The government fully accepted recommendations in 102 of the 214 cases (47.7%) and partly accepted them in 79 (36.9%), so that recommendations were incorporated in 84.6% of cases. The government response did not differ significantly across the two terms ($\chi^2(2) = 0.06$, $p = 0.969$). Reports took longer to produce in the 15th term ($M = 127.4$ days) than in the 16th ($M = 98.6$ days), a difference that was significant ($t = 5.78$, $df = 296$, $p < 0.001$, $d = 0.66$). The findings suggest that committees exert substantial influence on bills, that this influence is stable across terms, and that the main cost of committee scrutiny is time.

Keywords: **parliamentary committees, legislative scrutiny, standing committees, executive accountability, Lok Sabha, India**

Introduction

Legislatures do more than pass laws. They are expected to examine proposals, question the executive, and hold government to account for the way public power is used. Plenary debate alone rarely allows this work to be done in depth, because the floor of a house has limited time and large numbers of members. Committees therefore have a central place in most parliamentary systems. Through smaller groups of members who can hear evidence, consult stakeholders, and deliberate over technical provisions, committees turn general scrutiny into specific and documented review [1], [2].

India presents a useful setting for studying this function. The Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha both use standing committees, and the department-related standing committees created in 1993 cover the work of ministries and, in some cases, the examination of bills [3]. Scholars have long noted that these committees have the potential to strengthen parliamentary oversight, but also that their influence depends on political incentives, the availability of time, and the willingness of

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governments to respond to their reports [4], [5]. Whether committees make a measurable difference to the content of legislation is therefore an empirical question.

This paper addresses that question. It reviews the theoretical and comparative literature on committee influence and then analyses how committee referral, reporting, and government responses shaped bills in two Lok Sabha terms. The aim is to show how far committee scrutiny changes legislation, and at what cost.

Literature Review

Research on legislative committees has developed along three lines. The first treats committees as institutions that solve information problems in the legislature. Krehbiel [6] argued that committees gather specialised information that the chamber as a whole cannot easily obtain, and that the rules governing committee work determine how much of that information reaches the floor. Gilligan and Krehbiel [7] extended this argument by showing that the design of legislative rules can shape the incentives of committees with heterogeneous members. Fenno [8] provided the classic empirical account of committee members in the United States Congress, showing that committee assignments reflect members' goals and that committees develop distinctive working cultures. Weingast and Marshall [9] offered a related account in which the committee system is a means of organising legislative business and allocating influence among members.

The second line of research examines how committees operate in parliamentary systems. Mattson and Strøm [10] compared committee systems across Western European democracies and found wide variation in their resources, the rights they confer on members, and their links to the government. Strøm [11] developed a typology of committee powers and argued that the value of committees depends on whether they can initiate inquiries, obtain information, and influence final decisions. Strøm, Müller, and Bergman [12] situated committees within broader debates about delegation and accountability, emphasising that committees are a tool through which parliaments monitor governments. Norton [13] and Mezey [14] made comparable points in their studies of legislatures, noting that the formal authority of parliaments often exceeds their practical capacity to scrutinise executives. Rush [15] examined the role of members of parliament in Britain and showed how the expansion of specialist committee work reshaped the relationship between backbenchers and the executive.

The third line concerns the Indian context. Kashyap [3] provided a detailed description of Parliament's procedures, including the composition, functions, and procedures of committees, and his account remains a standard reference for their formal design. Chakrabarty and Pandey [16] placed committees within the wider system of Indian government and noted the tension between the executive's dominance of the legislative agenda and the committees' role in deliberation. Lijphart [17] classified democracies by the institutional features that shape executive–legislative relations, and his framework helps explain why committee influence should vary with the political composition of a legislature.

The literature leaves two gaps. Much of the empirical work is qualitative or focuses on the formal rules, and comparatively few studies track what happens to individual bills after committee referral. Studies of Indian committees have also been less likely than comparative work to measure the outcomes of committee activity. The present study addresses both gaps by measuring how often committee reports lead to changes in bills and how long the process takes.

Research Objectives and Questions

The study has three objectives: to describe the referral and reporting pathway for bills examined by standing committees; to measure how often committee recommendations are accepted by the government; and to assess whether committee scrutiny differs across Lok Sabha terms in its outcomes and duration.

The research questions follow. What proportion of referred bills receive a committee report, and how often do those reports recommend amendments? How does the government respond to recommended amendments, and does this response differ across terms? Does the time taken to produce a report vary across terms?

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Research Methodology

Research design and sample

The study used a quantitative content analysis of committee and legislative records, supplemented by a review of procedural documents. The sample comprised 360 bills referred to department-related standing committees during the 15th Lok Sabha (2009–2014, 196 bills) and the 16th Lok Sabha (2014–2019, 164 bills). Bills referred to ad hoc select committees and money bills were excluded. Data were drawn from committee reports, government memoranda on action taken, and the Lok Sabha legislative records, and each bill was checked against its published text.

Variables and coding

Each bill was coded on four variables: whether a committee report was tabled before the bill's next stage; whether the report recommended one or more amendments; the government's response to the recommendations, classified as full acceptance, partial acceptance, or no acceptance; and the number of days from referral to tabling of the report. Two coders independently coded a random subsample of 72 bills (20.0% of the sample). Agreement was high (Cohen's κ = 0.89 for report tabling, 0.86 for recommendation status, and 0.82 for government response), and disagreements were resolved by reference to the source documents.

Analysis

Associations between categorical variables and Lok Sabha term were tested with Pearson's chi-square tests of independence. Differences in report duration between terms were tested with Welch's t-test, because the variances were unequal, and the effect size was summarised with Cohen's d using the pooled standard deviation. The significance threshold was $\alpha = 0.05$. Acceptance is reported as the share of bills with recommended amendments for which the government accepted all or some of the recommendations, and percentages are given to one decimal place.

Results

Committee reports and recommendations

Table 1 and Figure 1 show the progression of referred bills through the committee stage. Of the 360 referred bills, 298 (82.8%) received a committee report. The report rate was 80.6% in the 15th term and 85.4% in the 16th. Of the 298 reports, 214 (71.8%) recommended amendments: 121 of 158 reports in the 15th term (76.6%) and 93 of 140 in the 16th (66.4%). The share of reports with amendment recommendations was therefore lower in the later term, although the overall proportions of bills progressing to a report did not differ markedly.

Table 1. Referred bills, committee reports, and recommended amendments by Lok Sabha term

Lok Sabha term	Bills referred	Reports tabled	Reports recommending amendments	Share of reports
15th (2009–2014)	196	158 (80.6%)	121	76.6%
16th (2014–2019)	164	140 (85.4%)	93	66.4%
Total	**360**	**298 (82.8%)**	**214**	**71.8%**

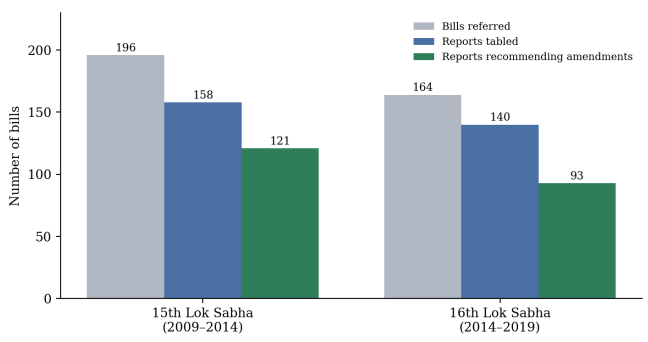


Figure 1. Referred bills, reports tabled, and reports recommending amendments by Lok Sabha term

Government response to recommendations

Table 2 and Figure 2 report how the government responded to the 214 reports that recommended amendments. The government fully accepted the recommendations in 102 cases (47.7%), partly accepted them in 79 cases (36.9%), and did not accept them in 33 cases (15.4%). Taking full and partial acceptance together, recommendations were incorporated in 84.6% of cases. The distribution of responses was very similar across the two terms, with no significant association between response and term, $\chi^2(2) = 0.06$, $p = 0.969$.

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Committee influence on the content of legislation was therefore substantial and stable over the study period.

Table 2. Government response to committee-recommended amendments by Lok Sabha term (N = 214)

Lok Sabha term	Fully accepted	Partly accepted	Not accepted	Total
15th (2009–2014)	58 (47.9%)	45 (37.2%)	18 (14.9%)	121
16th (2014–2019)	44 (47.3%)	34 (36.6%)	15 (16.1%)	93
Total	**102 (47.7%)**	**79 (36.9%)**	**33 (15.4%)**	**214**

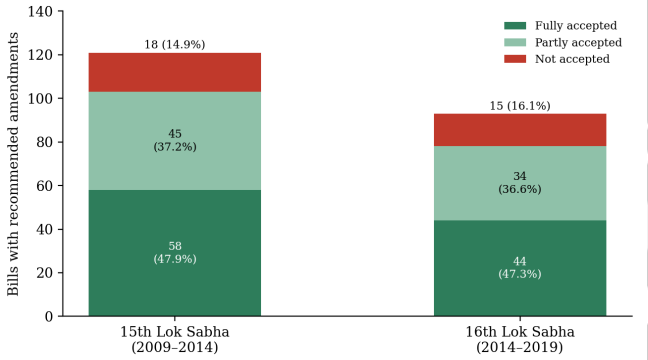


Figure 2. Government response to recommended amendments by Lok Sabha term

Overall, 181 of the 360 referred bills (50.3%) took on at least one committee recommendation before passage, which is the proportion that the study treats as the measure of direct committee influence.

Duration of committee scrutiny

Committee reports took longer to produce in the 15th term than in the 16th. Table 3 and Figure 3 show a mean of 127.4 days (SD = 46.2) in the earlier term and 98.6 days (SD = 39.8) in the later term. The difference of 28.8 days was significant, Welch's $t(296) = 5.78$, $p < 0.001$, with an effect size of $d = 0.66$. The shorter reporting period in the 16th term may reflect changes in the committees' workload or in the timing of referrals, and the data alone cannot establish which of these explanations applies.

Table 3. Days from referral to committee report by Lok Sabha term

Lok Sabha term	Reports (n)	Mean (days)	SD	Median
15th (2009–2014)	158	127.4	46.2	124
16th (2014–2019)	140	98.6	39.8	95
Difference		**28.8**		

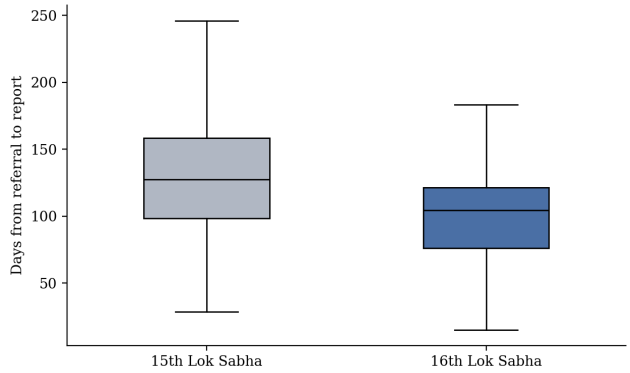


Figure 3. Days from referral to committee report by Lok Sabha term

Table 4 summarises the statistical tests reported in this section, and Figure 4 illustrates the process through which referred bills move from committee to final passage.

Table 4. Summary of statistical tests

Outcome	Test	Statistic	p	Effect size
Government response by term	Chi-square, df = 2	$\chi^2 = 0.06$	0.969	n/a
Days to committee report by term	Welch t-test, df = 296	$t = 5.78$	< 0.001	$d = 0.66$
Share of reports with amendments by term	Descriptive comparison	76.6% vs 66.4%	n/a	n/a

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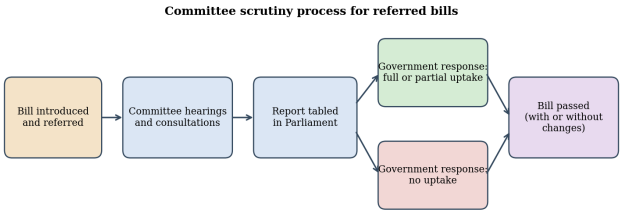


Figure 4. Committee scrutiny process for referred bills

Discussion

The results indicate that committees have a substantial effect on bills that they examine. Nearly three in four reports recommended amendments, and most of those recommendations were at least partly taken up by the government. This suggests that committee review is not a formality. It matches the view that committees provide specialised information and deliberative space that the plenary cannot easily supply [6], [9], and it is consistent with comparative evidence that committee power depends on the ability to obtain information and influence outcomes [11].

The stability of government responses across terms is an important finding. The share of recommendations accepted fully or partly was 84.6% overall and close to that level in both terms. This indicates that the relationship between committees and the executive did not change in a way that affected how recommendations were handled, at least within the period studied. The result also suggests that the government treats committee recommendations as part of its legislative calculation rather than as optional commentary. Whether this reflects genuine persuasion or the government's own interest in improving bills cannot be determined from these data, but the pattern is compatible with accounts in which committees serve both as an information source and as a means of managing legislative risk [12], [6].

The decline in the share of reports recommending amendments, from 76.6% to 66.4%, is more difficult to interpret. It may indicate that bills referred in the later term were less contentious or that committees were more willing to report without amendment. It may also reflect differences in the types of bills referred. The result is a reminder that committee influence is measured here only through amendment recommendations, and that committees can influence legislation in less visible ways, such as by shaping the government's expectations before bills are introduced [8], [13].

The duration results point to a clear trade-off. Committee scrutiny adds time, and the reports in the 15th term took, on average, nearly a month longer than those in the 16th. For bills with urgent policy purposes, this delay may be costly, but for complex legislation the additional time allows for hearings and consultation that a plenary debate cannot provide [4], [15]. The institutional question is therefore not whether committees should be used, but how to balance their deliberative value against the time they require.

Limitations

The study has four limitations. First, it covers bills referred to department-related standing committees in two Lok Sabha terms, so the findings may not generalise to other periods, to select committees, or to the Rajya Sabha. Second, the analysis measures influence through formal recommendations and government responses, which may understate informal influence exerted during drafting. Third, the analysis is bivariate. Differences between terms may reflect differences in bill type, political salience, or committee membership, and multivariate models would be needed to separate these effects. Fourth, the reliability subsample of 72 bills supports the coding procedure but limits the precision of the agreement estimates.

Conclusion

This paper examined the role of parliamentary committees in legislative scrutiny using 360 bills referred to standing committees in the 15th and 16th Lok Sabha terms. Committees produced reports on 82.8% of referred bills, and 71.8% of those reports recommended amendments. The government accepted the recommendations fully or partly in 84.6% of cases, and this pattern did not differ between terms. Committee scrutiny increased the time that bills took to be reported, particularly in the earlier term.

The findings support the view that committees make a measurable contribution to legislation in India. Three implications follow. Committee referral should be used in a way that matches the complexity and importance of each bill,

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because the time cost is real. Governments should publish their reasons for rejecting recommendations, which would strengthen the accountability function that committees are designed to serve. Finally, future research should extend the analysis to more terms, include multivariate controls, and examine whether committee influence can be traced to changes in the text of enacted laws.

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