

Legislating Without Scrutiny: Executive Aggrandizement and Democratic Erosion in India

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April 9, 2026

Abstract

On September 20, 2020, the Indian Parliament passed three laws restructuring the country's agricultural markets. Total debate time: under two hours. None of the bills had been referred to a standing committee. This was not an aberration. Under the BJP-led National Democratic Alliance (NDA), committee referral rates for legislation collapsed from 73% to 6%, and bills that once took nearly a year to pass now clear Parliament in weeks. Drawing on 1,008 parliamentary bills, automated text analysis of 881 central acts, and cross-national democracy indicators, I show that India has experienced a systematic pattern of *executive aggrandizement*: the legal, incremental expansion of executive power at the expense of parliament, the judiciary, subnational governments, and citizens. A synthetic control analysis reveals that India's judicial constraints declined significantly after 2014 relative to a counterfactual (ATT = -0.051 , $p = 0.024$). All eight V-Dem democracy indicators I examine declined under the NDA, even after controlling for pre-existing trends. These findings demonstrate that

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democratic erosion can proceed entirely within the formal rules of the game, posing a measurement and accountability challenge that existing frameworks often miss.

Keywords: executive aggrandizement, democratic backsliding, India, legislative oversight, text analysis, causal inference

1 Introduction

In September 2020, India's upper house of Parliament descended into chaos. Opposition members demanded a division vote on three farm bills that would reshape the lives of hundreds of millions of agricultural workers. The Deputy Chairman of the Rajya Sabha declared the bills passed by voice vote, amid shouting and broken microphones. The bills had not been referred to a standing committee. They had been introduced in the Lok Sabha just four days earlier. Within two years, the laws would be repealed following nationwide protests, but the procedural facts remained: three of the most consequential economic reforms in Indian history had cleared Parliament with virtually no legislative scrutiny.

This episode captures a broader institutional transformation. Since the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) secured the first single-party parliamentary majority in thirty years in 2014, India's legislature has been progressively sidelined from the policymaking process. The share of bills referred to standing committees fell from 73% under the UPA government to 6% under the NDA's second term. Median passage time dropped from 268 days to 11 days. These are not marginal shifts. They represent a fundamental change in how the world's largest democracy makes its laws.

This paper argues that India is undergoing *executive aggrandizement*: the gradual, legal expansion of executive power at the expense of other democratic institutions (Bermeo, 2016). Khaitan (2019) frames this phenomenon more precisely as a crisis of executive accountability afflicting established democracies: the incremental dismantling of the electoral, institutional, and discursive checking mechanisms that liberal democratic constitutions put in place to constrain the political executive. Unlike coups or electoral fraud, executive aggrandizement operates through the ordinary machinery of governance. Bills are still debated (if briefly), courts still sit, elections still take place. But the institutional checks that constrain executive action are progressively weakened, hollowed out from

within rather than abolished from without.¹

India is uniquely suited to the study of this phenomenon. It is consequential because 1.4 billion people live under its constitutional framework; democratic erosion here affects more lives than in any other country. It is analytically tractable because India's federal structure provides variation that most single-country studies lack. Twenty-eight states hold staggered elections, sustain diverse party systems, and experience BJP governance at different times, generating the kind of variation needed for credible causal inference. India's prolific legislative output and well-documented parliamentary statistics further enable rigorous quantitative analysis in a domain where qualitative case studies have predominated.

I make three contributions. First, I provide the most comprehensive quantitative documentation of executive aggrandizement in India to date, combining automated text analysis of 881 central acts with behavioral indicators covering over 1,000 parliamentary bills. Second, I use interrupted time series and synthetic control methods to estimate the institutional effects of single-party dominance, moving beyond description toward causal inference. Third, I identify a distinctive mechanism: rather than amending the constitution or restructuring the courts, the executive has primarily operated through procedural channels (bypassing committees, accelerating passage, using ordinances) that attract less public scrutiny but are equally consequential for institutional balance.²

Two features of these findings deserve emphasis at the outset. First, the patterns documented here are not matters of partisan interpretation. They are observable in publicly available data, replicable with open-source code, and confirmed by independently coded cross-national indicators. A committee referral rate of 6% is not a matter of perspective; it is a measurable fact about how India's legislature functions. Second, the analysis does

¹Khaitan (2020) captures this dynamic with the metaphor of killing a constitution with a thousand cuts: no single action crosses a constitutional line, but the cumulative effect fundamentally alters the balance of power. This framing is now widely used in the comparative law literature on India.

²This procedural channel distinguishes India from the constitutional engineering seen in Hungary (Bánkúti, Halmai and Scheppele, 2012) or the direct judicial assault in Poland (Sadurski, 2019). India's executive operates within existing provisions rather than rewriting them.

not claim that Indian democracy has ended or that the country has become authoritarian. India continues to hold competitive elections, sustain an independent (if constrained) judiciary, and support a vibrant civil society. The claim is more specific: the institutional checks designed to constrain executive power have been significantly weakened, and this weakening tracks closely with the period of single-party dominance.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews the literature on democratic backsliding and executive aggrandizement. Section 3 develops the theoretical framework applied to India. Section 4 describes the data and measurement strategy. Section 5 lays out the identification strategy. Sections 6 and 7 present the results and robustness checks. Section 8 discusses implications, and Section 9 concludes.

2 Literature Review

The study of democratic breakdown has undergone a fundamental conceptual shift over the past two decades. Where an earlier generation of scholars focused on sudden regime collapse through military coups or revolutionary upheaval, contemporary research emphasizes gradual processes of institutional deterioration (Diamond, 2015). Bermeo (2016) documents this shift empirically: between 2000 and 2015, executive aggrandizement and strategic electoral manipulation replaced coups as the primary modes of democratic reversal. Levitsky and Ziblatt (2024) popularized the term “democratic backsliding” for this pattern, in which elected leaders use their democratic mandates to erode the very institutions that constrain them.

The analytical challenge is that backsliding is multidimensional. Waldner and Lust (2018) distinguish the degradation of electoral processes, the erosion of horizontal accountability (legislatures, courts, oversight bodies), and the restriction of civil liberties (press, assembly, civic space). These dimensions frequently co-occur but need not proceed at the same pace. A government may maintain competitive elections while systematically

undermining judicial independence, or preserve formal civil liberties while hollowing out legislative oversight. This unevenness complicates both measurement and response.

What makes the current wave of autocratization distinctive, according to Lührmann and Lindberg (2019), is that it proceeds through legal channels, unfolds incrementally (making it difficult to identify a single moment of breakdown), and often enjoys genuine popular support. Svobik (2019) provides a microfoundation for this last point: in polarized societies, voters are willing to tolerate erosion of democratic norms if the alternative is a victory for the opposing camp. Gidron et al. (2025), studying Israel's judicial overhaul, find that affective polarization and attachment to the leader are the strongest predictors of support for backsliding measures, while populist attitudes play little role. Electoral accountability, the mechanism most democratic theory relies on to check incumbent abuse, may thus be systematically weakened precisely when it is most needed.³

Among the various mechanisms of democratic erosion, executive aggrandizement stands out for its reliance on formal legality. Ginsburg and Huq (2020) define it as the use of institutional prerogatives to expand executive power and weaken competing centers of authority. The toolkit includes constitutional amendments, strategic judicial appointments, legislative procedures that concentrate agenda control, and the deployment of emergency powers for ordinary governance. Crucially, each individual step can be defended as lawful; it is only the accumulation and direction of these steps that constitutes a democratic threat. Laebens (2023) refines the concept further by defining executive aggrandizement as the simultaneous weakening of both horizontal accountability (constraints from the judiciary, legislature, and oversight bodies) and vertical accountability (electoral competition and opposition space). Using V-Dem indicators, she identifies 26 cases of aggrandizement in democracies worldwide between 1989 and 2019, finding con-

³Graham and Svobik (2020) demonstrate this experimentally for the United States. The Indian context, with its deep social polarization along religious and caste lines and a highly personalistic leadership style, is at least as susceptible to this dynamic. Whether Indian voters would support formal institutional overhaul of the kind proposed in Israel remains an open question; the argument of this paper is that the Indian executive has not needed to ask, because procedural bypass achieves much of the same result without triggering mass mobilization.

siderable variation in outcomes: only a minority resulted in democratic breakdown, while a majority ended with the incumbent being forced out of office. This variation cautions against equating aggrandizement with inevitable democratic collapse, and underscores the importance of studying the phenomenon on its own terms rather than through the lens of regime outcomes.

Scheppele (2018) coins the term *autocratic legalism* to capture how leaders like Viktor Orbán use formal legal processes to dismantle constitutional constraints from within. In Hungary, a two-thirds parliamentary supermajority enabled constitutional amendments, new media regulations, and a restructured judiciary, all accomplished through formally lawful action (Bánkuti, Halmai and Scheppele, 2012). Poland's Law and Justice party targeted the Constitutional Tribunal directly through legislation (Sadurski, 2019). Turkey combined emergency powers with a constitutional referendum to remake the presidency (Esen and Gumuscu, 2016). In each case, the institutional damage was enacted through processes that, taken individually, appeared legitimate. The legal veneer made international condemnation harder and domestic resistance more complicated.

These comparative cases inform the Indian analysis in a specific way: they establish that the executive does not need to violate the constitution to subvert it. It is sufficient to systematically exploit its provisions in ways their framers did not intend.

India occupies a distinctive position in the backsliding literature. Its democratic institutions were designed with unusual care. The Constituent Assembly debated for nearly three years (1946–1949), producing one of the most elaborate constitutional frameworks of the postwar era (Granville, 1966). The provisions for an independent judiciary, a bicameral legislature with meaningful committee oversight, and a federal system distributing power across 28 states were explicitly designed to prevent the concentration of executive authority (Khosla, 2020).⁴

⁴The framers were acutely aware of the risks. B.R. Ambedkar, the principal drafter, warned the Assembly that India's democracy could become merely a matter of form rather than substance if its institutions were not zealously guarded. See Austin (1966), Chapter 5.

Yet India's relationship with democratic norms has never been linear. The Emergency of 1975–1977, during which Indira Gandhi suspended civil liberties, censored the press, and imprisoned political opponents, demonstrated that even well-designed constitutional systems can be subverted from within. The Emergency is relevant not as a direct precedent for current events, but as a structural reminder: the tension between executive ambition and institutional constraint is a recurring feature of Indian politics, not a novelty of the post-2014 period.

The contemporary literature centers on developments since the BJP's decisive 2014 victory. [Khaitan \(2020\)](#) provides the most systematic legal analysis, documenting aggrandizement across multiple institutional domains and coining the influential metaphor of a thousand cuts. [Jaffrelot \(2021\)](#) situates the institutional shifts within the broader project of Hindu nationalism, arguing that the BJP's vision of ethnic democracy is inherently in tension with the pluralist constitutional design. [Varshney \(2022\)](#) identifies what he calls institutional choking points: the government does not eliminate opposition but makes it progressively costlier through regulatory instruments, investigative agencies, and media management. [Ganguly \(2019\)](#) places India's trajectory in the broader context of democratic recession in South Asia.

What the existing literature largely lacks is systematic quantification. Khaitan's analysis is legal rather than statistical. V-Dem confirms a decline in India's scores ([Coppedge, 2024](#)), but at a level of aggregation that obscures specific mechanisms. Journalistic accounts are vivid but selective. This paper fills the gap by combining legislative text analysis with parliamentary practice data to produce comprehensive, replicable measures of executive aggrandizement.⁵

⁵The text-as-data approach builds on a growing literature in political science that uses automated content analysis to measure political concepts at scale ([Grimmer, Roberts and Stewart, 2022](#)). I use a dictionary-based method because the legal vocabulary of executive power in India is specific enough to support high-quality dictionaries, and because the transparency of the approach facilitates replication ([Laver, Benoit and Garry, 2003](#); [Benoit et al., 2016](#)).

3 Theoretical Framework: Executive Aggrandizement in India

I build on the analytical framework developed by Magni-Berton and Camatarri (2026) in the TWIN4DEM project, which conceptualizes executive aggrandizement along four institutional directions defined by the relationship between the executive and other power-holding institutions: parliament, the judiciary, subnational governments, and citizens.⁶ I apply this framework to India, where the four directions map onto concrete constitutional provisions and institutional relationships that differ substantially from the European parliamentary democracies for which the framework was originally developed. Within each direction, the executive can expand its power through four *mechanisms*: delegation (concentrating authority in executive bodies), discretion (expanding executive decision-making latitude), oversight limitation (weakening monitoring and accountability), and bypass (circumventing institutional checks entirely). This 4×4 matrix generates 16 categories of aggrandizement, each with concrete empirical referents in the Indian context. I describe the four directions below; the mechanisms are operationalized through the text analysis dictionary detailed in the data section and Appendix B.

Parliament

India's Parliament was designed as the primary check on executive authority, holding the government accountable through debate, committee scrutiny, question hour, and the power to withdraw confidence (Granville, 1966). The institutional architecture assumes that legislation will be examined before it is enacted. Standing committees were created precisely for this purpose: they review bills in detail, take expert testimony, and publish recommendations that inform the full house's deliberation. When the executive bypasses

⁶The framework's core insight is that aggrandizement is *directional* and can proceed unevenly across institutional domains. See also Ginsburg and Huq (2020) and Khaitan (2020) for complementary typologies of executive overreach.

this process, Parliament retains the formal power to vote but loses the substantive capacity to legislate with knowledge and independence. The collapse of committee referral documented in this paper represents the most direct form of parliamentary marginalization.

Beyond committees, two other mechanisms deserve attention. The ordinance power under Article 123 allows the President (acting on cabinet advice) to promulgate laws when Parliament is not in session. Ordinances carry the same legal force as statutes but expire unless ratified within six weeks. Their use as a routine governance tool, rather than the emergency measure the framers intended, converts Parliament from a legislative body into a ratification chamber.⁷ The Money Bill route offers an even more potent form of bypass. Under Article 110, bills certified as Money Bills by the Lok Sabha Speaker bypass the Rajya Sabha entirely, reducing the upper house to a 14-day advisory role. Because the Speaker's certification is shielded from judicial review by Article 122, this mechanism allows the executive to circumvent bicameral scrutiny on any legislation it can plausibly label as financial. The passage of the Aadhaar Act (2016) as a Money Bill, despite its sweeping implications for privacy and surveillance, demonstrated the reach of this provision (Bhatia, 2023).

The Judiciary

The independence of India's higher judiciary has historically rested on the collegium system for appointments, a convention established through a series of Supreme Court decisions in the 1990s. The government's attempt to replace this system with a National Judicial Appointments Commission (NJAC), struck down by the Court in 2015, represented the most direct confrontation between executive and judicial authority since the Emergency. But the more consequential erosion has been administrative rather than legislative.

⁷Between 2014 and 2024, the central government promulgated an average of 9 ordinances per year, compared to 7 under the UPA and 4 in the 1990s. The trend predates the current government but has intensified under it.

By selectively delaying confirmation of collegium recommendations, leaving High Court vacancies unfilled for years, and restructuring tribunals to reduce judicial oversight, the executive has weakened the judiciary's capacity without formally altering its constitutional status (Mehta, 2007). As I show in the results, the EA language in legislation targeting the judiciary actually *declined* under the NDA, precisely because the executive found non-legislative channels more effective.

Subnational Governments

India's federal system distributes substantial powers to the states under the Seventh Schedule of the Constitution. But the Centre retains powerful levers. Governors, appointed under Article 155, serve at the pleasure of the President (in practice, the Prime Minister) and have been used to delay or obstruct the legislative programs of opposition-governed states (Sharma, 2002). President's Rule under Article 356 allows the Centre to dissolve a state government and assume direct control. Fiscal transfers through centrally sponsored schemes create financial dependence. The goods and services tax regime, while celebrated as an economic reform, transferred significant fiscal authority from states to a federal council in which the Centre holds effective veto power (Tillin, 2019).

The most dramatic assertion of central power came in August 2019, when the government abrogated Article 370, which had guaranteed Jammu & Kashmir a degree of constitutional autonomy since 1950. The state was simultaneously bifurcated into two Union Territories, a reorganization accomplished through a parliamentary resolution that bypassed the state's own legislature (which had been dissolved under President's Rule). No state had previously been demoted to Union Territory status against the wishes of its residents.

Citizens

The fourth direction of aggrandizement targets the civic space within which citizens organize, dissent, and hold power accountable. Several legal instruments have been deployed to this end. The Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act allows preventive detention without bail for up to six months, and its application has expanded significantly since 2014 to encompass activists, journalists, and academics alongside suspected militants. The Prevention of Money Laundering Act gives the Enforcement Directorate broad powers to attach property and arrest individuals, powers that have been disproportionately directed at political opponents (Jaffrelot, 2021). India has led the world in government-ordered internet shutdowns every year since tracking began, with over 345 documented events between 2012 and 2025.⁸ The Foreign Contribution Regulation Act has been used to restrict international funding for civil society organizations, and amendments to the Information Technology Rules have imposed compliance requirements on social media platforms that critics view as enabling content censorship (Jayal, 2019).

A crucial enabling condition for executive aggrandizement is the attitude of the public. Svobik (2019) shows that in polarized electorates, voters tolerate democratic erosion rather than risk the opposing camp winning power. Gidron et al. (2025) find that affective polarization and leader attachment, not populist ideology, predict support for backsliding in Israel. In India, the conditions for this dynamic are at least as pronounced: deep polarization along religious and caste lines, a highly personalistic leadership style, and a political culture in which deference to authority coexists with robust democratic aspirations (Chhibber and Verma, 2018). If a substantial share of the public views institutional checks as impediments rather than safeguards, the executive faces minimal political cost for bypassing them. The survey data I examine below suggest that this is precisely the case.

⁸Data from the Digital Watch project (SFLC.in) and Access Now's Shutdown Tracker Optimization Project. Jammu & Kashmir accounts for nearly half of all events, but shutdowns have been documented in 24 of India's 28 states.

Empirical Expectations

The theoretical framework generates four testable expectations, each corresponding to a distinct empirical domain.

First, if the NDA government has pursued executive aggrandizement through parliamentary bypass, we should observe a sharp decline in the institutional mechanisms through which Parliament exercises independent judgment. Committee referral rates and passage times should fall discontinuously after 2014, and these shifts should not be attributable to pre-existing trends (*H1: Parliamentary marginalization*).

Second, if the legislative text itself reflects an expansion of executive authority, the density of EA-related language in central acts should increase under the NDA. This expectation is less straightforward than it appears: if the executive achieves its aims through procedural channels (bypassing scrutiny rather than writing more aggressive statutes), the textual signal may be muted or concentrated in specific directions (*H2: Legislative text*).

Third, independently coded cross-national indicators of democratic quality should register the institutional changes documented through domestic sources. If executive aggrandizement is real and consequential, V-Dem measures of judicial constraints, legislative constraints, freedom of expression, and related dimensions should decline after 2014, and India's trajectory should diverge from comparable democracies (*H3: Cross-national validation*).

Fourth, if BJP governance per se drives executive overreach rather than the specific political configuration at the Centre, we should observe increased use of executive instruments in states where the BJP holds power. India's staggered state elections provide the variation needed to test this proposition (*H4: Subnational extension*).

These expectations are not all confirmed. The results section documents strong support for H1 and H3, a theoretically informative pattern for H2, and a clear null for H4. The null at the state level turns out to be as substantively important as the positive findings

at the centre, because it clarifies the institutional channel through which Indian executive aggrandizement operates.

4 Data and Measurement

Measuring executive aggrandizement requires data that can capture both the formal content of legislation and the informal practices through which laws are made. I combine four sources, each illuminating a different dimension of the phenomenon.

The most direct window into legislative scrutiny comes from the bills themselves. PRS Legislative Research, an independent parliamentary monitoring organization, tracks every bill introduced in India's Parliament: when it was introduced, whether it was referred to a standing committee, when it passed, and how long the house debated it.⁹ I compiled records for 1,008 bills introduced between 2009 and 2026, spanning the transition from UPA government (15th Lok Sabha, 2009–2014) to three successive NDA terms (16th through 18th Lok Sabhas).

Three indicators capture the scrutiny deficit. The first is whether the bill was referred to a standing committee, the institution designed to provide Parliament with expertise and considered judgment independent of the executive. The second is passage speed: the number of days between a bill's introduction and its final passage. The third is rapid passage, defined as clearing Parliament within seven days of introduction. Together, these indicators measure not what Parliament decides, but how much deliberation goes into the decision.

While parliamentary practice tells us *how* laws are made, the text of the laws themselves reveals *what kind* of authority they confer. I analyze the full text of 881 central acts from a publicly available corpus, covering all major legislation from 1950 to 2024.¹⁰ For

⁹PRS Legislative Research is widely regarded as the authoritative source on Indian parliamentary statistics. Its data is used by parliamentarians, journalists, and scholars, and is published under a Creative Commons license.

¹⁰The corpus is available on HuggingFace as [geekyrakshit/indian-legal-acts](https://huggingface.co/geekyrakshit/indian-legal-acts). A supplementary

each act, I apply a dictionary of 316 phrases associated with executive aggrandizement, organized into the 16 categories of the theoretical framework. The dictionary was constructed from the constitutional vocabulary of executive power (Articles 110, 123, 200, 213, 246, 356) and the legal scholarship on Indian institutional design (Khaitan, 2020; Mate, 2018).

Each act receives a density score: EA hits per 10,000 characters, normalized to allow comparison across statutes of different length. The dictionary discriminates well between legislation known to concentrate executive authority and routine statutes: the Aadhaar Act scores 204 hits, the UAPA Amendment 131, and the J&K Reorganisation Act 433, while the Sale of Goods Act scores zero.¹¹

India's federal structure provides the cross-sectional variation needed to test whether BJP governance at the state level is associated with executive overreach. I construct a panel of 31 states and Union Territories observed annually from 2004 to 2025 (682 state-year observations), coding whether each state is governed by the BJP or an NDA coalition partner. The BJP's expansion from 4 states in 2004 to 17 by 2021, with considerable temporal variation in when each state transitioned, provides the staggered treatment that the difference-in-differences design requires (Figure 1).

For state-level outcomes, I draw on internet shutdown data from two sources: the Digital Watch dataset (2012–2020, 280 events across 24 states) and Access Now's Shutdown Tracker Optimization Project (2020–2025, 65 events).¹² I also incorporate constituency-level election data from the Trivedi Centre for Political Data at Ashoka University, which provides the vote margins needed for close-election analysis.

To assess whether the patterns observed in India reflect a broader global trend or something specific to the Indian context, I use the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) project's

structured version from Zenodo (DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.5088102) provides chapter and section breakdowns.

¹¹Full dictionary details, validation results, and the complete phrase list are provided in Appendix B.

¹²India has led the world in government-ordered internet shutdowns every year since tracking began. The combined dataset covers 345 shutdown events. Jammu & Kashmir accounts for roughly half of all events, motivating a robustness check excluding the state.

expert-coded indicators (Coppedge, 2024). I examine eight dimensions: liberal democracy, judicial constraints on the executive, legislative constraints, freedom of expression, civil society participation, rule of law, freedom of association, and free and fair elections. V-Dem serves a dual purpose: as an independent check on the patterns I document using Indian sources, and as the basis for a synthetic control analysis that constructs a counterfactual India from comparable democracies.

The institutional analysis is complemented by public opinion data from the Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) and South Asia Democratic Survey (SDSA), which provide three snapshots of Indian attitudes toward democratic institutions: 2005 ($N = 2,055$), 2013 ($N = 3,058$), and 2019 ($N = 5,318$) (South Asia Democratic Survey (SDSA), 2005, 2013; Asian Barometer Survey, 2019). These surveys contain standardized batteries on institutional trust, support for authoritarian alternatives, and attitudes toward executive authority that allow me to track the demand-side conditions enabling executive aggrandizement across the pre-NDA and NDA periods.

5 Identification Strategy

The central challenge in attributing institutional change to a specific government is that government formation is endogenous. The BJP won in 2014 for reasons (economic discontent, anti-incumbency, organizational strength) that may themselves correlate with democratic trajectory. To address this, I use three strategies, ordered by evidentiary weight for the core findings.¹³

The core parliamentary outcomes (committee referral, passage speed) vary only at the national level: all bills face the same government. The natural design is an interrupted time series that estimates whether outcomes shifted discontinuously at the point of gov-

¹³The ITS design is primary because it directly estimates the break in parliamentary practice. The synthetic control provides independent cross-national validation. The state-level DiD tests whether the pattern extends to subnational governance, which turns out to be a null.

Table 1: Summary Statistics

	Mean	SD	Min	Max
<i>Panel A: Parliamentary Bills (N = 1,008)</i>				
Referred to committee	0.23	0.42	0	1
Passage days	208	270	0	1,541
Rapid passage (≤ 7 days)	0.21	0.41	0	1
NDA government	0.78	0.41	0	1
<i>Panel B: Central Acts, Post-1990 (N = 289)</i>				
EA density (per 10k chars)	10.52	8.55	0	50.8
Document length (chars)	48,753	115,629	286	1,276,343
NDA era (post-2014)	0.26	0.44	0	1
<i>Panel C: State-Year Panel, 2013–2025 (N = 403)</i>				
Internet shutdowns	0.84	3.90	0	49
Any shutdown	0.16	0.37	0	1
BJP/NDA state government	0.44	0.50	0	1
<i>Panel D: V-Dem India, 1990–2024 (N = 34)</i>				
Liberal democracy	0.46	0.09	0.28	0.56
Judicial constraints	0.77	0.05	0.69	0.83
Freedom of expression	0.72	0.17	0.42	0.89
Civil society participation	0.78	0.07	0.59	0.85

Notes: Panel A covers bills introduced in the 15th–18th Lok Sabhas (2009–2026). Panel B restricts the legislation corpus to post-1990 acts. Panel C restricts the state-year panel to years with internet shutdown data. Panel D uses V-Dem v14 data.

ernment change, controlling for any pre-existing trend:

$$Y_t = \alpha + \beta \cdot \text{NDA}_t + \gamma \cdot \text{trend}_t + \varepsilon_t \quad (1)$$

The coefficient β captures the level shift in Y associated with NDA government, net of trend. I also estimate specifications with trend interactions and quadratic trends to test whether the results are sensitive to the assumed counterfactual path. The key assumption is that, absent the change in government, the outcome would have continued along its pre-2014 trajectory. This cannot be directly tested, but the pre-treatment data provides a plausibility check: referral rates were stable or slightly increasing before 2014, ruling out

the possibility that the NDA merely accelerated a pre-existing decline.¹⁴

A concern with the ITS is that something other than the NDA government may have changed in 2014, and that any concurrent shock (economic, social, technological) could confound the estimate. To address this, I use a synthetic control method (Abadie, Di-
amond and Hainmueller, 2010; Abadie, 2021) that asks: how would India’s V-Dem in-
dicators have evolved if we could rewind history and install a different government?
The method constructs a weighted combination of 19 comparable democracies (includ-
ing Brazil, South Africa, Argentina, and Indonesia), calibrated to match India’s pre-2014
trajectory. The post-2014 gap between actual and synthetic India estimates the treatment
effect. Placebo tests, applying the same method to each donor country, assess whether
India’s estimated effect is unusually large.

India’s federal structure offers a second source of variation: the BJP came to power
in different states at different times. If BJP governance causes executive overreach, we
should see state-level outcomes shift when the BJP takes office. I estimate a two-way
fixed effects model:

$$Y_{st} = \alpha + \beta \cdot \text{BJP}_{st} + \gamma_s + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{st} \quad (2)$$

with state and year fixed effects and standard errors clustered at the state level. I also
implement the Sun and Abraham (2021) estimator, which accounts for heterogeneous
treatment effects across cohorts. The design is well-powered: BJP governance expanded
from 4 states (13%) in 2004 to 17 (55%) by 2021, with substantial temporal variation in
adoption (Figure 1). Event-study estimates are reported in Appendix D.

¹⁴The 15th Lok Sabha’s 73% referral rate was higher than the 14th’s 60%, which in turn was higher than
the 13th’s 40%. The trajectory before 2014, if anything, was toward *more* committee scrutiny, not less.

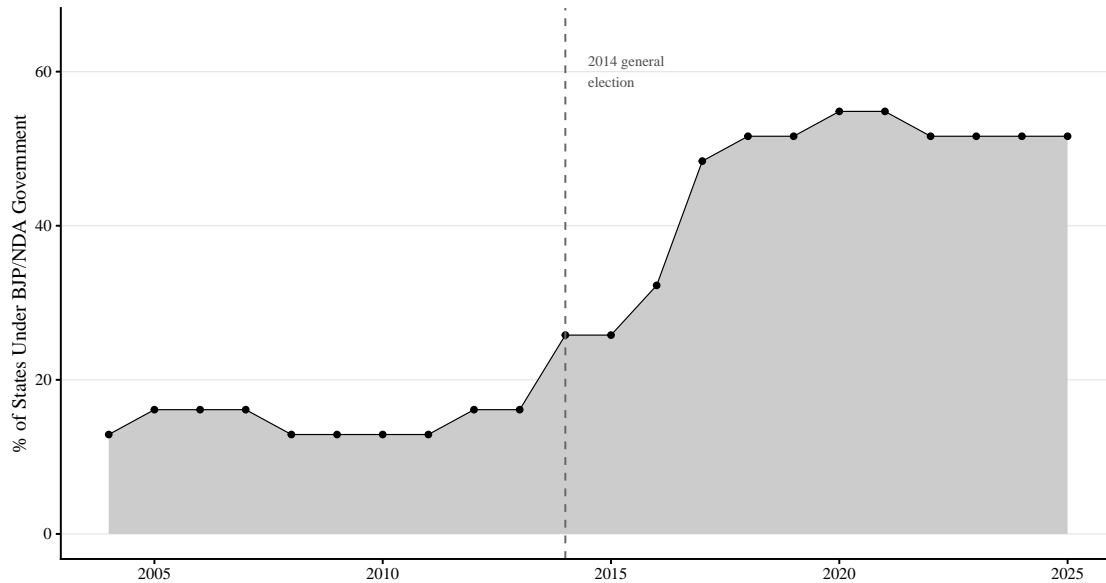


Figure 1: BJP/NDA share of state governments, 2004–2025. The staggered expansion from 13% to 55% provides the identifying variation for the difference-in-differences design.

6 Results

Table 2 provides a consolidated overview of the main findings before I discuss each in detail. The results fall into a clear pattern: evidence of executive aggrandizement is overwhelming at the central institutional level (parliamentary practice, V-Dem indicators) but absent at the state level (internet shutdowns), suggesting that the dominant channel of democratic erosion in India is procedural bypass at the center rather than state-by-state coercion.

Parliamentary Scrutiny Has Collapsed (H1)

The most striking finding is the near-complete elimination of standing committee scrutiny under NDA governments. Figure 2 shows the committee referral rate by year of bill introduction. Under the UPA’s 15th Lok Sabha (2009–2014), 73% of bills were referred to standing committees for detailed examination. This figure dropped to 12% in the NDA’s

Table 2: Overview of Main Results

Outcome	Method	Estimate	p	N
Committee referral rate	OLS	-0.638	<.001	1,008
Passage days	OLS	-195.6	<.001	432
Rapid passage (≤ 7 days)	OLS	+0.208	<.001	437
V-Dem liberal democracy	ITS	-0.167	<.001	34
V-Dem judicial constraints	Synth. control	-0.051	.024	19
V-Dem freedom of expression	ITS	-0.294	<.001	34
Judiciary EA in legislation	OLS	-1.379	.018	289
Internet shutdowns (state DiD)	TWFE	-0.377	.208	403

Notes: Rows 1–3 compare NDA (16th–18th Lok Sabha) to UPA (15th Lok Sabha). Rows 4 and 6 use interrupted time series with a linear trend. Row 5 uses augmented synthetic control with 19 comparator democracies. Row 7 controls for log document length, restricted to post-1990 acts. Row 8 includes state and year fixed effects with clustered standard errors.

16th Lok Sabha, 6% in the 17th, and 12% in the early 18th.¹⁵ The decline is not gradual: it represents a structural break coinciding precisely with the change in government.

Table 3 presents regression results. A simple OLS regression of committee referral on an NDA indicator yields a coefficient of -0.638 ($p < 0.001$), indicating a 63.8 percentage point decline in referral probability. The result is robust to the inclusion of a linear year trend ($\beta = -0.610$, $p < 0.001$) and session-type controls ($\beta = -0.612$, $p < 0.001$). A logistic regression yields an odds ratio of $\exp(-3.27) = 0.038$, meaning NDA bills are 96% less likely to be referred to committee than UPA bills.

Legislative passage has accelerated commensurately. Median passage time fell from 268 days under UPA to 57 days in the 16th LS, 11 days in the 17th, and just 4 days in the 18th. An OLS regression estimates that NDA government reduces passage time by 196 days ($p < 0.001$). In log terms, the NDA coefficient is -1.43 ($p < 0.001$), corresponding to a roughly 76% reduction in passage time. The share of bills passing within one week of introduction rose from 10% under UPA to 21% under NDA ($\beta = 0.208$, $p < 0.001$).

Figure 3 visualizes the shift in the distribution.

¹⁵The slight uptick in the 18th Lok Sabha (2024–) may reflect the BJP’s reduced majority after the 2024 election, which for the first time since 2014 required coalition partners to maintain a working majority. Whether this represents a durable shift remains to be seen.

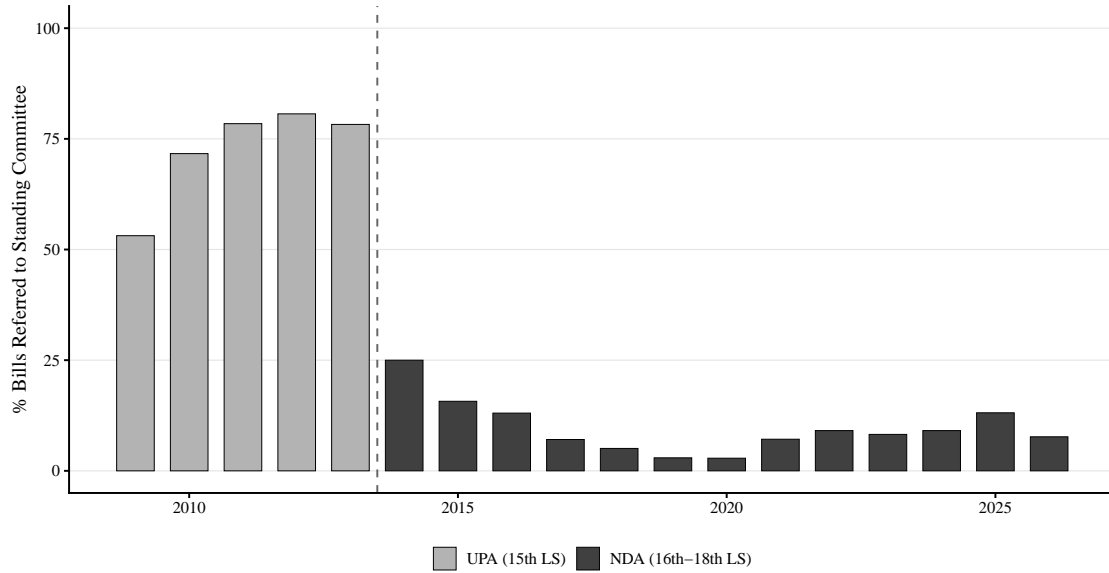


Figure 2: Standing Committee Referral Rates by Year of Bill Introduction

EA Language in Legislation (H2)

Does the text of legislation itself reflect executive aggrandizement? Figure 4 shows mean EA dictionary density over time, with separate trend lines fitted before and after 2014. At the act level (post-1990 sample), NDA-era acts show lower density of judiciary-related EA language ($\beta = -1.38$ per 10,000 characters, $p = 0.018$), controlling for document length. This counterintuitive result is consistent with the qualitative evidence: the NDA’s pressure on the judiciary has operated primarily through administrative and appointment channels, not through legislation. When the executive can delay judicial appointments indefinitely or restructure tribunals through existing statutory authority, it does not need to legislate new constraints.

At the year-aggregated level (with ITS trend control), subnational EA language shows a marginal increase under NDA ($\beta = 2.32$, $p = 0.099$), consistent with the centralizing trajectory documented in the theoretical framework: GST implementation, the GNCTD Amendment, and the reorganization of Jammu & Kashmir.

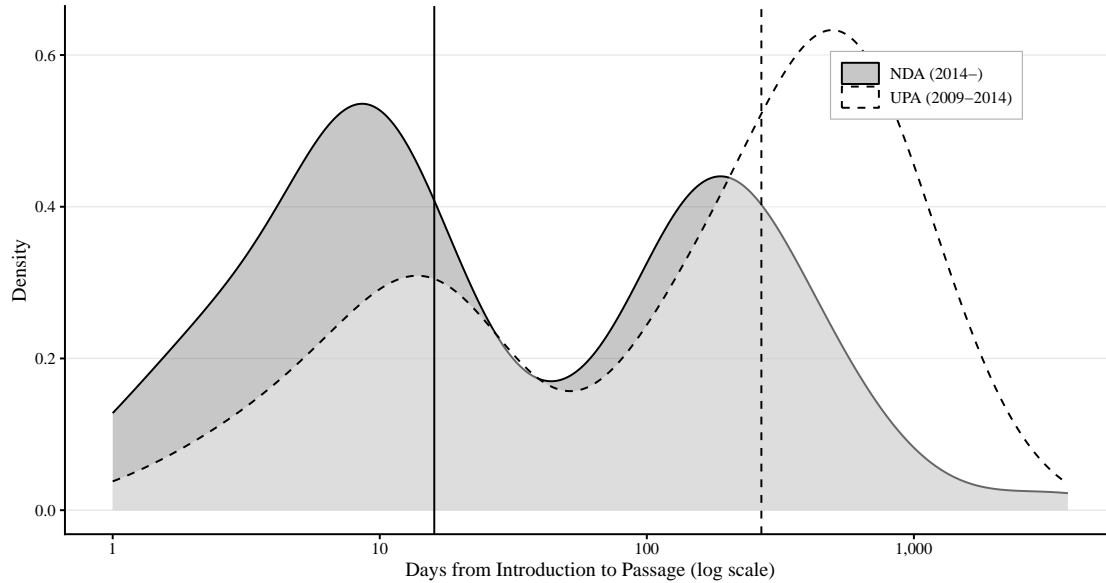


Figure 3: Distribution of Days from Introduction to Passage, by Regime

V-Dem Indicators: External Validation (H3)

V-Dem data provides independent validation of the patterns documented above. Figure 5 shows the trajectories of six V-Dem indicators for India from 1990 to 2024. All indicators show stability or modest improvement before 2014, followed by sharp decline. Table 4 presents the ITS estimates. Controlling for a linear time trend, the NDA coefficient is negative and statistically significant for all eight indicators examined.

The largest declines are in freedom of expression ($\beta = -0.294, p < 0.001$), civil society participation ($\beta = -0.210, p < 0.001$), and liberal democracy ($\beta = -0.167, p < 0.001$). Judicial constraints show a smaller but highly significant decline ($\beta = -0.051, p < 0.001$), consistent with the synthetic control result ($ATT = -0.051, p = 0.024$) from a separate analysis using 19 comparator countries. Legislative constraints on the executive declined by -0.126 ($p < 0.001$), corroborating the parliamentary practice findings with an independent measurement approach.

Table 3: Parliamentary Practice Under NDA Government

	Committee Referral			Passage Speed	
	OLS (1)	OLS + trend (2)	Logit (3)	Days (4)	Log days (5)
NDA	-0.638*** (0.032)	-0.610*** (0.044)	-3.271*** (0.195)	-195.6*** (39.5)	-1.432*** (0.201)
Year trend		-0.003 (0.004)			
Observations	1,008	1,008	1,008	432	432
R^2 / Pseudo R^2	0.389	0.389	0.318	0.049	0.104

Notes: Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors in parentheses. Columns 1–3 estimate the probability of committee referral. Columns 4–5 are restricted to bills that passed. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

State-Level Shutdowns: An Informative Null (H4)

The staggered difference-in-differences analysis using internet shutdowns as the outcome yields null results across all specifications. The TWFE estimate for BJP state government on shutdown count is -0.38 ($p = 0.21$). The [Sun and Abraham \(2021\)](#) event study yields an ATT of -0.049 ($p = 0.87$). The null persists when excluding Jammu & Kashmir (which accounts for 48% of all shutdowns), using Poisson regression for count data, substituting binary or IHS-transformed outcomes, or restricting to politically motivated shutdowns.

This null result is informative rather than disappointing. Internet shutdowns in India are ordered by state governments and district magistrates, but the legal framework (Section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure and the Temporary Suspension of Telecom Services Rules) is centrally defined. The null suggests that shutdown decisions are driven by local security conditions and state-level political dynamics rather than by the partisan identity of the state government. Executive aggrandizement in India operates primarily through central, not state-level, institutional channels.

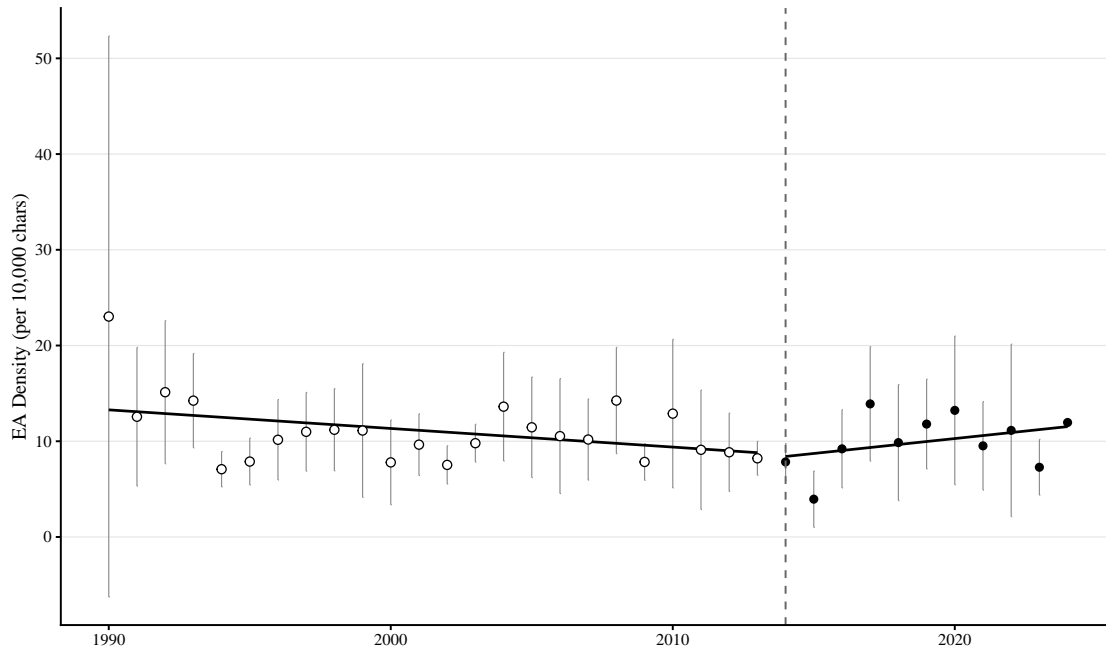


Figure 4: EA Language Density in Central Legislation, 1990–2024

Public Attitudes: The Demand Side of Aggrandizement

The institutional findings documented above raise a natural question: does the Indian public perceive democratic erosion, or does it acquiesce in, or even welcome, the expansion of executive authority? Survey data from the Asian Barometer and South Asia Democratic surveys provide a striking answer. Table 5 reports key attitudinal indicators across three waves spanning the pre-NDA and NDA periods.

Support for abolishing parliament in favor of a strong leader rose from 41% in 2005 to 52% in 2013 and 59% in 2019, an 18 percentage point increase over fourteen years (Figure 6, panel b). By 2019, nearly two-thirds of respondents agreed that morally upright leaders should be able to decide everything without being constrained by institutions (64%), and a similar share endorsed the proposition that government leaders are like the head of a family and should be followed (67%). Half of respondents agreed that judges should accept the view of the executive (49%), and a majority endorsed the idea that government should decide what ideas can be discussed in society (62%).

These attitudes coexist with continued democratic identification. In 2019, 58% of re-

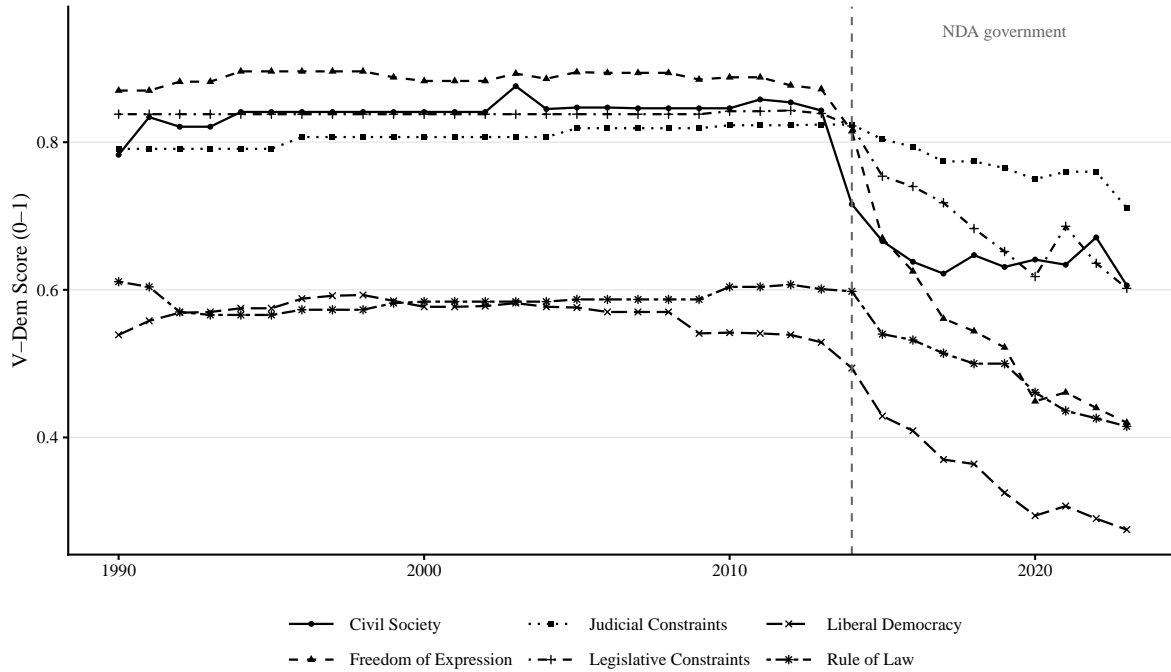


Figure 5: V-Dem Democracy Indicators for India, 1990–2024

spondents said democracy is always preferable to other forms of government, and 70% expressed satisfaction with how democracy works in India. The mean democracy rating rose from 5.4 (on a 1–10 scale) in 2013 to 6.3 in 2019. This is not a contradiction: it is the pattern that Svobik (2019) predicts. Citizens support democratic governance in the abstract while endorsing the specific executive prerogatives that undermine it in practice. The gap between diffuse democratic support and specific institutional deference is precisely what makes procedural aggrandizement politically sustainable.

Institutional trust data reinforce the pattern (Figure 6, panel a). Trust in the executive (PM) rose from 75% in 2005 to 81% in 2019, while trust in Parliament lagged at 73% and trust in political parties remained below 51%. The executive enjoys the highest trust of any civilian institution, and the gap has widened over time. When citizens trust the leader more than the institutions designed to check the leader, the political conditions for aggrandizement are favorable.¹⁶

¹⁶The 2019 fieldwork was conducted in November, shortly after the BJP’s landslide re-election victory and the abrogation of Article 370 in August. Both events may have inflated executive trust. Nevertheless,

Table 4: V-Dem Interrupted Time Series: Effect of NDA Government

	LibDem (1)	JuCon (2)	LegCon (3)	FreeExp (4)	RuleLaw (5)	CSPart (6)	FreeFair (7)
NDA	-0.167*** (0.028)	-0.051*** (0.013)	-0.126*** (0.027)	-0.294*** (0.050)	-0.087*** (0.023)	-0.210*** (0.015)	-0.152*** (0.034)
Trend	-0.007*** (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.001 (0.001)	-0.008* (0.004)	-0.005** (0.002)	-0.005*** (0.001)	-0.001 (0.002)
<i>N</i>	34	34	34	34	34	34	34
<i>R</i> ²	0.978	0.838	0.807	0.946	0.917	0.968	0.824

Notes: Each column is a separate OLS regression of the V-Dem indicator on an NDA dummy (= 1 for $t \geq 2014$) and a linear trend ($t - 2014$). Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

7 Robustness

I assess the robustness of the main findings along three dimensions: sensitivity of the V-Dem estimates to trend specification, stability of the state-level null, and robustness of the text analysis to outliers. The substantive question of whether the parliamentary findings reflect efficiency rather than erosion is addressed in the Discussion. Appendix E presents the full set of parliamentary practice specifications.

The V-Dem results are the estimates most vulnerable to specification choices, since the ITS design relies on the assumed counterfactual trend. Table 6 presents the NDA coefficient under three trend specifications: linear, quadratic, and linear with a slope change (allowing the trend itself to shift after 2014). The quadratic specification attenuates the estimates, as expected, since a flexible pre-treatment trend absorbs more of the post-treatment variation. But the indicators showing the largest declines survive: civil society participation ($\beta = -0.171$, $p < 0.001$), liberal democracy ($\beta = -0.056$, $p = 0.034$), and freedom of expression ($\beta = -0.130$, $p = 0.057$). The slope-change specification tells a similar story, with the NDA level shift remaining significant for all five indicators. The synthetic control analysis, which constructs a counterfactual from 19 comparable democracies rather than the cross-wave trend is consistent: executive trust has risen steadily while partisan trust has remained low.

Table 5: Public Attitudes Toward Democratic Institutions and Executive Authority

	2005 (SDSA W1)	2013 (SDSA W2)	2019 (ABS W5)
<i>Institutional Trust (% trusting)</i>			
Executive (PM / Central govt)	74.8	76.3	80.8
Parliament	66.2	70.4	72.9
Courts	69.9	77.5	82.9
Military	89.9	88.4	90.4
Political parties	43.5	42.9	51.3
<i>Authoritarian Preferences (% agreeing)</i>			
Strong leader, no parliament	40.9	51.5	59.0
Leaders can decide everything	—	—	64.1
Judges should defer to executive	—	—	49.2
Checking govt is harmful	—	—	53.4
Govt should control ideas discussed	—	—	62.4
<i>Democratic Identification</i>			
Democracy always preferable	—	—	58.3
Satisfied with democracy	—	—	70.3
Democracy rating (1–10)	—	5.42	6.33

Notes: Data from the South Asia Democratic Survey (2005, 2013) and Asian Barometer Survey Wave 5 (2019). India-only samples. Trust combines “trust fully/great deal” and “trust somewhat/quite a lot.” “—” indicates the item was not asked in that wave. *N* ranges from 1,366 to 5,318 depending on wave and item.

extrapolating India’s own trend, provides a non-parametric check. Placebo tests show that most donor countries exhibit ATTs close to zero for judicial constraints, while India’s effect (−0.051) is among the largest. Leave-one-out exclusion of each donor yields stable liberal democracy estimates between −0.13 and −0.17.

For the state-level analysis, the null result is itself robust. Shifting the treatment date three years earlier produces no significant placebo effect ($\beta = -0.72, p = 0.17$), ruling out the possibility that the null is an artifact of treatment timing. Excluding each state in turn yields TWFE coefficients ranging from −0.58 to −0.06, confirming that no single state (including the outlier Jammu & Kashmir) drives the result. The Sun and Abraham (2021) event-study estimates, reported in Appendix D, show clean pre-trends with no significant pre-treatment coefficients, supporting the parallel trends assumption even though the

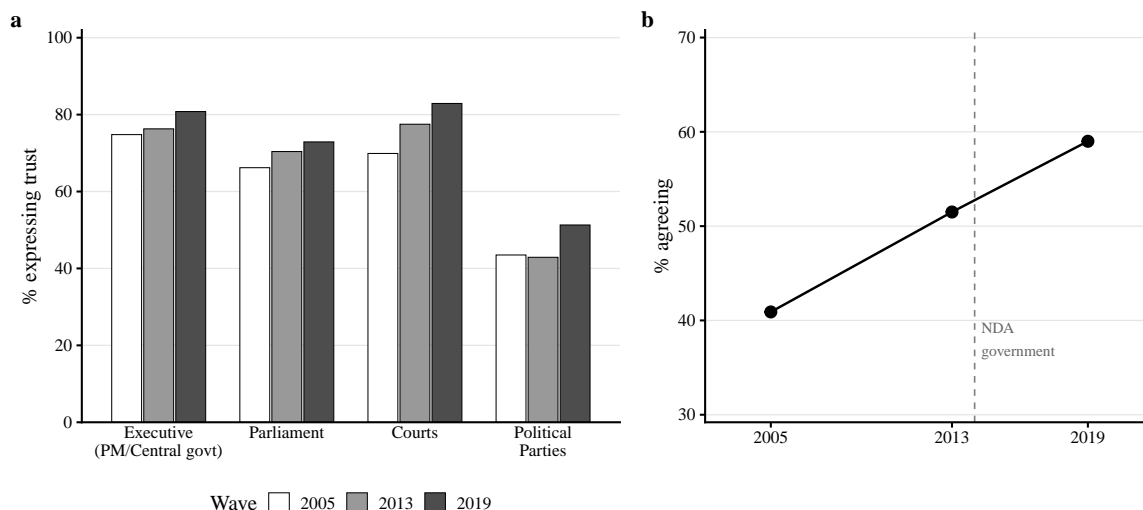


Figure 6: Public attitudes toward institutions and executive authority in India, 2005–2019. Panel (a) shows institutional trust across three survey waves. Panel (b) shows support for replacing parliament with a strong leader, with the dashed line marking the onset of NDA government.

treatment effect itself is null.

For the text analysis, I address the concern that a few very long omnibus acts (such as the Companies Act or the Income Tax Act) might mechanically inflate EA density scores. Excluding the top 5% of acts by document length does not qualitatively change the results. The judiciary finding, if anything, strengthens ($\beta = -0.74, p = 0.080$), while the overall density estimate remains close to zero and insignificant, consistent with the interpretation that EA operates through procedural bypass rather than legislative text.

8 Discussion

The results converge on a central finding: India’s executive aggrandizement has operated primarily through procedural channels that avoid the visibility and political cost of constitutional amendment. The government has not rewritten the Constitution; it has not formally abolished standing committees, dissolved the Rajya Sabha, or eliminated judicial review. Instead, it has used its parliamentary majority to change how institutions

Table 6: V-Dem Robustness: NDA Coefficient Under Alternative Trend Specifications

	Linear trend	Quadratic trend	Slope change
Liberal democracy	-0.167*** (0.028)	-0.056** (0.025)	-0.095*** (0.017)
Judicial constraints	-0.051*** (0.013)	-0.004 (0.015)	-0.014** (0.006)
Freedom of expression	-0.294*** (0.050)	-0.129* (0.066)	-0.164*** (0.037)
Civil society	-0.210*** (0.015)	-0.171*** (0.023)	-0.186*** (0.020)
Rule of law	-0.087*** (0.023)	-0.018 (0.031)	-0.021* (0.011)

Notes: Each cell reports the NDA coefficient from a separate regression. All regressions use $N = 34$ annual observations (1990–2024). Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors in parentheses. The linear specification controls for $t - 2014$; the quadratic adds $(t - 2014)^2$; the slope-change specification interacts the trend with the NDA indicator. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

function in practice. Bills still go to Parliament, but without committee scrutiny. Courts still operate, but with mounting vacancies and restructured tribunals. States still have legislatures, but centrally-appointed governors increasingly intervene in their functioning.

This procedural channel has important implications for how we study democratic erosion. Much of the existing literature, particularly the comparative work on Hungary, Poland, and Turkey, focuses on formal institutional changes: constitutional amendments, new organic laws, restructured courts. These are visible, dramatic, and relatively easy to measure. India’s experience suggests that a significant share of democratic erosion can occur without any of these markers. A government with a determined majority can hollow out legislative oversight, accelerate passage beyond the point of meaningful deliberation, and use existing statutory provisions (Article 123 for ordinances, Article 110 for Money Bills, Article 155 for governor appointments) in ways their framers never intended.¹⁷

The implication for measurement is that scholars and monitoring organizations cannot rely solely on changes to formal rules as indicators of democratic health. Committee referral rates, passage speed, ordinance frequency, and judicial vacancy rates are prosaic

¹⁷The BJP’s Lok Sabha majority (282 of 543 seats in 2014, 303 in 2019) was sufficient for ordinary legislation but fell short of the two-thirds required for constitutional amendments. This constraint may have channeled aggrandizement toward procedural rather than structural avenues. Whether the same government with a supermajority would have pursued a more Hungarian-style path remains counterfactual.

metrics, but they capture erosion that constitutional analysis alone would miss.

Efficiency or Erosion?

The most important challenge to this interpretation is straightforward: perhaps the decline in committee referrals and the acceleration of passage simply reflect efficient, decisive governance rather than democratic erosion. The UPA's second term (2009–2014) was widely criticized for policy paralysis. A government with a clear mandate should be able to legislate faster. Why is that a problem?

The answer turns on the distinction between speed and scrutiny. A government can legislate decisively *after* committee review. The German Bundestag and British Parliament routinely pass legislation within weeks of committee examination. Committees do not produce paralysis; they produce informed legislation. The median committee review in the 15th Lok Sabha took approximately three months, a modest investment for laws that will govern 1.4 billion people for decades.

More fundamentally, the referral decision is not forced on the government by opposition strength. Committee referral is at the discretion of the Speaker and the Business Advisory Committee, both controlled by the ruling party. The opposition cannot compel referral through a floor vote. The decline from 73% to 6% therefore reflects a deliberate procedural choice, not an automatic consequence of majority size. If efficiency were the motive, one would expect selective bypass for genuinely urgent legislation. Instead, the pattern is near-universal: bills overhauling the entire criminal justice system (replacing the Indian Penal Code, the Code of Criminal Procedure, and the Indian Evidence Act simultaneously), restructuring agricultural markets, and reorganizing a state into Union Territories all passed without committee examination.

The pre-2014 trend further undermines the efficiency interpretation. Committee referral rates were *increasing* before 2014: from approximately 40% in the 13th Lok Sabha to 60% in the 14th and 73% in the 15th. The 15th Lok Sabha had a more comfortable major-

ity than the 13th, yet referred more bills, not fewer. The structural break coincides with the change in government, not with any change in the formal rules governing committee referral.¹⁸

Finally, the V-Dem findings are difficult to reconcile with an efficiency story. If the NDA were simply governing more efficiently, one would not expect independently coded expert assessments of judicial constraints, freedom of expression, civil society participation, and rule of law to decline simultaneously and significantly. Efficiency does not explain why V-Dem's measure of legislative constraints on the executive fell by 0.126 points ($p < 0.001$), or why freedom of expression declined by 0.294 points. These are not measures of legislative throughput; they are measures of institutional balance.

The survey data add a further dimension. The efficiency framing assumes that the public demands competent governance and the government is delivering it. But when 59% of respondents endorse abolishing parliament in favor of a strong leader, 53% say that constant checking of government is harmful, and 49% agree that judges should defer to the executive, the public is not demanding efficient *scrutiny*; a substantial share is demanding no scrutiny at all. The political incentive structure facing the NDA is not one in which bypassing committees carries electoral costs. It is one in which bypassing committees may carry electoral *rewards*, because it signals the decisive leadership that a majority of voters say they want.

India in Comparative Perspective

How does India compare with the canonical cases of contemporary backsliding? Hungary under Orbán relied on constitutional engineering enabled by a two-thirds supermajority: a new Fundamental Law, packed courts, a restructured media authority (Bánkuti, Halmai and Scheppele, 2012). Poland's Law and Justice party waged open institutional

¹⁸India's standing committee system was established in 1993 and has operated under the same procedural rules throughout the period under study. No rule change in 2014 altered the referral process. The shift is entirely behavioral.

warfare against the Constitutional Tribunal and Supreme Court (Sadurski, 2019). Turkey combined emergency powers with a constitutional referendum to refashion the presidency itself (Esen and Gumuscu, 2016).

India's path diverges in three ways. First, the absence of a constitutional supermajority has constrained formal institutional redesign, redirecting aggrandizement into procedural channels. Second, India's federal structure creates both obstacles and opportunities: opposition-governed states serve as sites of resistance (filing Supreme Court challenges, refusing to implement central directives), but the Centre's control over governors, fiscal transfers, and investigative agencies provides powerful levers of subnational influence (Aiyar and Tillin, 2020; Sharma, 2002). Third, the sheer scale of India's democratic apparatus makes erosion uneven. An independent judiciary, a vibrant civil society, and a combative press continue to function, even if under increasing constraint. India's democracy has not collapsed; it has been selectively weakened in the institutional domains where the executive faces the least resistance.

This unevenness is itself analytically important. It suggests that executive aggrandizement is strategic: governments invest their political capital where the returns are highest and the costs lowest. Bypassing parliamentary committees is procedurally simple and generates little public backlash. Packing the Supreme Court would be constitutionally complex and politically explosive. The pattern of Indian EA is consistent with a model of strategic institutional investment, in which the executive targets the weakest links in the accountability chain first. The survey data suggest a further Indian distinctiveness: the demand-side conditions for aggrandizement are unusually favorable. The 59% who endorse a strong leader over parliament far exceeds comparable figures in most established democracies, and the combination of high executive trust with low party trust creates a permissive environment for personalistic governance that bypasses collective institutions.

Resilience and Limitations

It would be misleading to present India's story as one of unmitigated decline. Institutions have pushed back. The Supreme Court struck down the NJAC, reasserting the collegium's primacy in judicial appointments. State governments have challenged central legislation in court and used their constitutional authority to resist implementation of centrally mandated policies. Civil society organizations have mobilized effectively around specific issues, as the repeal of the farm laws in 2021 demonstrated.¹⁹ The press, while operating under increasing constraint, continues to produce investigative journalism on matters of governance and accountability. These points of resistance do not negate the findings documented here, but they qualify them. India's democratic erosion is real and measurable, but it is also contested and its outcome is not predetermined.

Several analytical limitations should also be acknowledged. The interrupted time series design for national-level outcomes cannot fully rule out confounders that coincide with the 2014 transition. India's economy, media landscape, and social fabric all changed during this period, and some of these changes may independently affect democratic indicators. The synthetic control analysis partially addresses this concern for V-Dem outcomes, but the parliamentary practice results rely fundamentally on the plausibility of the counterfactual: that referral rates and passage speed would have remained roughly stable absent the change in government.²⁰ The EA text analysis measures the *language* of legislation, not its implementation; laws with extensive delegation clauses may be used more or less aggressively depending on political context, and the finding that judiciary-related EA language *decreased* under the NDA illustrates this gap. Finally, the state-level analysis is constrained by data availability. Internet shutdowns represent only one dimen-

¹⁹The repeal followed over a year of sustained protests by farmers' unions, primarily in Punjab and Haryana. It represents the most significant policy reversal of the Modi government and suggests that executive aggrandizement, while significant, does not eliminate all avenues of democratic accountability.

²⁰The pre-2014 trend in referral rates was, if anything, slightly upward: the 15th Lok Sabha's 73% referral rate was higher than the 14th's 60%. There is no evidence of a pre-existing decline that the NDA merely accelerated.

sion of executive power vis-à-vis citizens. Richer state-level data on governor activism, state ordinance usage, and enforcement actions by central agencies would permit a more comprehensive test of the subnational hypothesis. Whether India's remaining democratic institutions prove sufficient to arrest or reverse the trajectory documented here is a question that quantitative analysis alone cannot answer.

9 Conclusion

This paper has documented the systematic erosion of institutional checks on executive power in India since 2014. The evidence is most compelling for parliamentary scrutiny: committee referral rates collapsed by nearly 64 percentage points, median passage time fell from 268 to 11 days, and over one-fifth of laws now pass within a week of introduction. These findings are corroborated by V-Dem data showing significant declines across every dimension of democratic quality I examined, and by a synthetic control analysis confirming that India's trajectory diverged from comparable democracies after 2014. At the same time, the null result on state-level internet shutdowns clarifies the mechanism: executive aggrandizement in India operates primarily through central institutional channels, not through the partisan identity of state governments.

The central implication is that democratic erosion can proceed entirely through legal, procedural channels. India's Constitution remains formally intact. Elections continue to be competitive. Courts remain open. But the practices and norms that gave these institutions their democratic substance have been progressively hollowed out. A parliament that passes laws in days rather than months, without committee examination, is formally sovereign but functionally subordinate. The gap between India's institutional design and its institutional reality has widened into something that demands scholarly attention.

Three broader contributions emerge. First, for the study of democratic backsliding, the Indian case demonstrates that procedural mechanisms of erosion can be as consequential

as structural ones. The literature's focus on constitutional amendments, court-packing, and electoral manipulation risks overlooking the quieter but equally important domain of legislative process. Committee referral rates and passage speed are not glamorous indicators, but they capture institutional health in ways that expert surveys and formal legal analysis cannot.

Second, for the study of Indian politics, the paper provides a quantitative foundation for claims that have until now rested primarily on legal scholarship and journalistic observation. The magnitudes documented here are large. A 64 percentage point decline in committee referral is not a modest shift in emphasis; it is the effective abandonment of a core institutional practice. Whether one views this as efficient governance or democratic erosion depends on normative priors, but the empirical facts are not in dispute.

Third, the text analysis framework demonstrates that automated methods can usefully measure executive aggrandizement in legislative corpora, complementing the behavioral indicators derived from parliamentary practice data. The finding that EA language in legislation does *not* increase under the NDA, even as behavioral indicators show dramatic change, is itself theoretically significant: it points to procedural bypass rather than legislative consolidation as the dominant channel. The executive does not need to write more aggressive laws when it can simply pass existing ones without scrutiny.

Looking ahead, several questions remain open. Can the patterns documented here be reversed if the political configuration changes? The slight uptick in committee referrals during the early 18th Lok Sabha, following the BJP's reduced 2024 majority, offers a tentative hint, but it is too early to draw conclusions. How do state-level dynamics interact with central institutional erosion when opposition parties control major states? And what role does the judiciary play as a potential backstop when legislative oversight fails? These questions will define the next phase of research on democratic resilience in India, and their answers will matter far beyond its borders.

For the 1.4 billion people who live under India's constitutional framework, the stakes

could not be higher. The framers of the Constitution spent three years deliberating its provisions, precisely because they understood that formal rules without institutional practice would be insufficient. The challenge for India's democracy is whether the practices that give those rules their substance can be rebuilt once they have been allowed to atrophy.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

Disclosure Statement

The author reports there are no competing interests to declare.

Data Availability Statement

Replication data and code are available at https://github.com/shreyasmehar/India_EA.

Acknowledgements

Survey data analyzed in this paper were collected by the Asian Barometer Project (2018–2021), co-directed by Professor Yun-han Chu, with funding from Taiwan's National Science and Technology Council, Academia Sinica, and National Taiwan University; and by the South Asia Democratic Survey. The Asian Barometer Project Office (www.asianbarometer.org) is solely responsible for data distribution. The author used Claude (Anthropic) for coding assistance and manuscript grammar checks. All substantive analysis, interpretation, and writing are the author's own.

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Appendix A Synthetic Control Results

The synthetic control analysis constructs a “synthetic India” from a weighted combination of 19 comparator democracies to estimate the counterfactual trajectory of India’s V-Dem indicators absent the BJP’s 2014 victory. Donor weights are: Argentina (29.5%), Hungary (13.6%), South Africa (8.6%), and 16 other countries with smaller weights.

Liberal democracy. The estimated ATT is -0.141 ($p = 0.17$), with 92% improvement in pre-treatment imbalance. While not statistically significant at conventional levels, leave-one-out analysis shows the estimate is stable between -0.13 and -0.17 across all 18 donor exclusions.

Judicial constraints. The ATT is -0.051 ($p = 0.024$), statistically significant. Placebo tests show that most donor countries exhibit ATTs close to zero, with only Poland (-0.22) and Hungary showing comparable declines.

Appendix B EA Dictionary Summary

The dictionary contains 316 phrases organized into 16 categories (4 directions \times 4 mechanisms). Table 7 summarizes the coverage.

Table 7: EA Dictionary Coverage by Direction and Mechanism

	Delegation	Discretion	Oversight	Bypass	Total
Parliament	29	24	25	25	103
Judiciary	18	18	19	14	69
Subnational	15	14	14	16	59
Citizens	17	22	20	21	80
Total	79	78	78	76	316

Appendix C Full DiD Specification Results

Table 8 presents the complete set of state-level DiD specifications. None reaches statistical significance at the 10% level.

Table 8: State-Level DiD: Internet Shutdowns Under BJP Government

	Count (1)	Binary (2)	IHS (3)	Duration (4)	Political (5)	Poisson (6)
BJP/NDA	-0.377 (0.292)	0.040 (0.051)	-0.003 (0.068)	0.521 (3.616)	-0.177 (0.187)	-0.082 (0.166)
State FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	403	403	403	403	403	198

Notes: Standard errors clustered by state. Column 6 uses Poisson pseudo-maximum likelihood; N is lower due to singleton fixed-effect removal. None is significant at the 10% level.

Appendix D Event Study Estimates

Figures 7 and 8 present the Sun and Abraham (2021) event-study estimates for the state-level DiD analysis. The horizontal axis measures years relative to the first year of BJP/NDA state governance; the vertical axis shows the estimated ATT. The shaded region represents 95% confidence intervals. Neither outcome shows a significant pre-trend or post-treatment effect, confirming the null result discussed in the main text. Importantly, the absence of pre-trends supports the parallel trends assumption even though the treatment effect itself is not significant, which bolsters the credibility of the DiD design for settings where richer state-level outcome data becomes available.

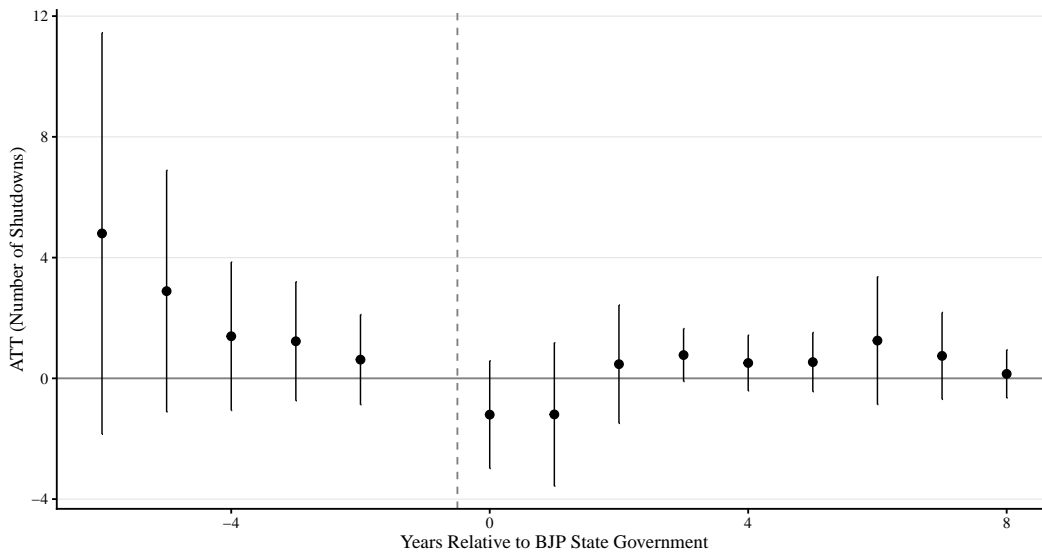


Figure 7: Sun and Abraham event study: internet shutdowns (count). Dashed vertical line marks the year before treatment. Shaded area shows 95% CIs. No pre-trends are evident; post-treatment estimates are statistically indistinguishable from zero.

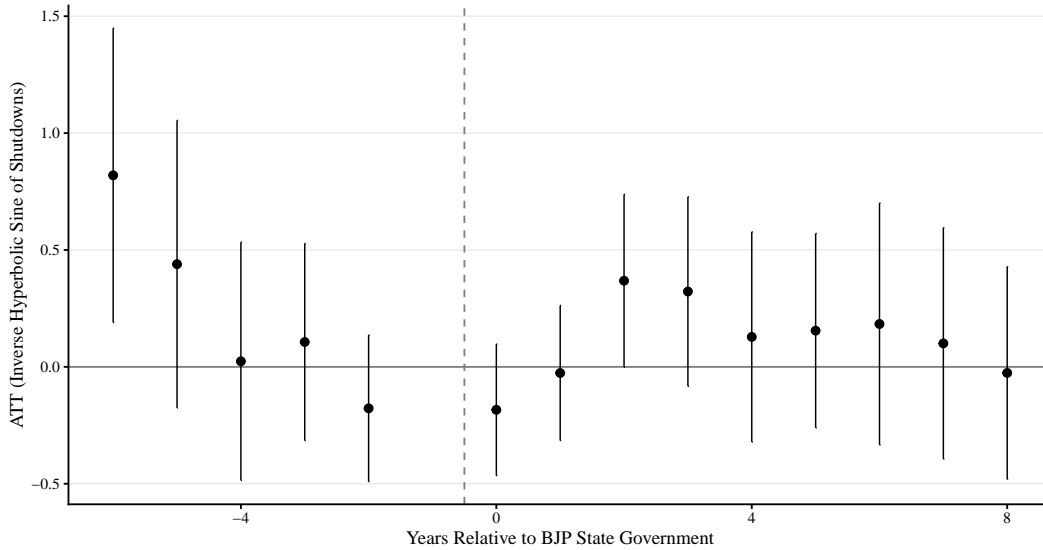


Figure 8: Sun and Abraham event study: inverse hyperbolic sine of shutdowns. Results are substantively identical to the count specification, confirming that the null is not an artifact of the functional form.

Appendix E Parliamentary Practice: Specification Robustness

Table 9 presents the committee referral and passage speed results under alternative specifications. The referral finding is exceptionally stable: the NDA coefficient remains between -0.61 and -0.67 across all specifications, including controls for year trend, session type, and individual Lok Sabha indicators. The passage speed results are more sensitive. When a linear year trend is included, the NDA coefficient on log passage days becomes insignificant ($p = 0.63$), because the trend variable is highly collinear with the NDA indicator (both switch on around 2014). This does not invalidate the finding that passage accelerated under the NDA; it means the acceleration cannot be cleanly separated from a broader temporal trend using a linear specification. The referral result, by contrast, is robust to the trend precisely because committee referral was *increasing* before 2014.

Table 9: Parliamentary Practice: Robustness to Alternative Specifications

	Committee Referral				Log Passage Days	
	Base (1)	+ Trend (2)	+ Session (3)	By LS (4)	Base (5)	+ Trend (6)
NDA	-0.638*** (0.032)	-0.610*** (0.044)	-0.612*** (0.044)		-1.432*** (0.201)	-0.167 (0.345)
16th LS				-0.617*** (0.034)		
17th LS				-0.669*** (0.033)		
18th LS				-0.617*** (0.044)		
<i>N</i>	1,008	1,008	1,008	1,008	432	432
<i>R</i> ²	0.389	0.389	0.391	0.391	0.104	0.105

Notes: Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors. Columns 1–4: dependent variable is binary committee referral. Column 4 uses Lok Sabha indicators with the 15th (UPA) as reference. Columns 5–6: dependent variable is log days from introduction to passage, restricted to passed bills. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Appendix F EA Text Scores by Direction

Table 10: EA Text Density by Direction: Act-Level Regressions

	Total (1)	Parliament (2)	Judiciary (3)	Subnational (4)	Citizens (5)
<i>All Acts (1950–2024, N = 668)</i>					
NDA (post-2014)	0.377 (0.927)	0.210 (0.425)	-0.661 (0.403)	0.546 (0.650)	0.282 (0.198)
<i>Post-1990 Acts (N = 289)</i>					
NDA (post-2014)	-0.458 (1.045)	0.083 (0.414)	-1.379** (0.581)	0.958 (0.665)	0.259 (0.208)
Controls	Log document length				

Notes: Dependent variable: EA dictionary density per 10,000 characters. Heteroskedasticity-robust standard errors. * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$.

Appendix G Data Sources and Codebook

Table 11: Data Sources

Source	Data	Coverage	N
PRS Legislative Research	Parliamentary bills	2009–2026	1,008 bills
HuggingFace/India Code	Central acts (full text)	1838–2024	881 acts
BJP state panel (coded)	State government party	2004–2025	682 st.-yrs
Digital Watch (SFLC.in)	Internet shutdowns	2012–2020	280 events
Access Now (STOP)	Internet shutdowns	2020–2025	65 events
TCPD, Ashoka Univ.	Constituency elections	1961–2023	483,565 rows
V-Dem v14	Democracy indicators	1990–2024	34 years
PRS/Wikipedia	Central ordinances	1950–2024	76 years