



Envisaging Strong Opposition

This editorial is based on "[Friction in Parliament reflects political reality](#)" which was published in Hindustan Times on 09/07/2024. The article highlights a significant change in the 18th Lok Sabha with a stronger opposition and challenges in maintaining decorum amidst increased scrutiny and assertive legislative dynamics.

For Prelims: [Parliamentary Committee System](#), [Leader of The Opposition \(LoP\)](#), [Parliament](#), [Parliamentary Opposition](#), [Central Bureau of Investigation \(CBI\)](#), [Central Vigilance Commissioner](#), [Chief Information Commissioner](#), [National Human Rights Commission](#), [Lokpal](#), [Directorate Of Enforcement \(ED\)](#), Electoral Bonds.

For Mains: Significance of Opposition for Proper Functioning of Parliament in Democracy like India.

Recent years have seen a shift where **disruptions**, rather than meaningful discussions, dominate **parliamentary proceedings**. Critical legislations like **farm laws** were alleged to have been passed without meaningful scrutiny from a **dispirited Opposition** and the [parliamentary committee system](#) was largely bypassed.

A **feeble opposition** poses greater risks than a weak government which can lead to detrimental consequences. A weak opposition fails to represent the voices and demands of a significant portion of the populace who did not support the ruling party.

The presence of a strong Opposition with **234 seats** along with the recognition of the [Leader of the Opposition \(LoP\)](#) in the **Lok Sabha**, which was vacant for a decade, has significantly altered the appearance and workings of [Parliament](#) in **18th Lok Sabha**.

"In a democracy, the opposition is not only tolerated as constitutional, but must be maintained because it is indispensable." --- Walter Whipmann

What is the Leader of Opposition?

▪ About Opposition in Parliament:

- Parliamentary opposition is a crucial political position to check the ruling government, especially in **Westminster-based parliamentary systems**.
- The **"Official/Principal Opposition"** title is typically held by the largest party opposing the government, with its leader designated as the **"Leader of the Opposition."**

▪ Leader of Opposition (LoP)

- The leader of the **largest opposition party** having **not less than one-tenth seats** of the total strength of the **House** is recognised as the **Leader of Opposition**.
- The leader of opposition is not a Constitutional post, rather it is a statutory post.

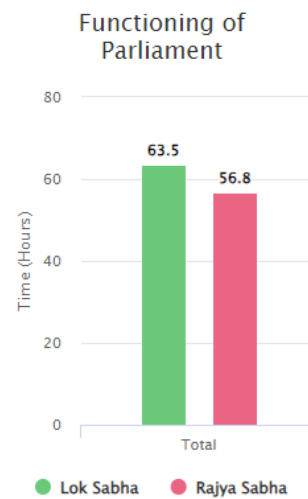
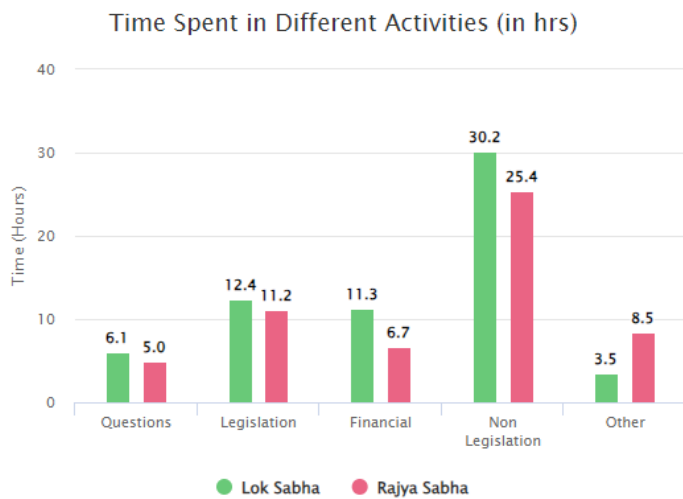
- The term Leader of the Opposition was defined for the first time by Parliament by enacting the **Salary and Allowances of Leaders of Opposition in Parliament Act, 1977**.
- LoP is the opposition's representative in the high-powered committees for appointment to key posts such as the **Director of [Central Bureau of Investigation \(CBI\)](#)**, the **[Central Vigilance Commissioner](#)** and **[Chief Information Commissioner](#)**, the **Chairperson and Members of the [National Human Rights Commission](#)**, **[Chief Election Commissioner](#)** and **[other Election Commissioners](#)** and the **[Lokpal](#)**.

Leader of the Opposition (LoP) in Westminster model of United Kingdom:

- In the **Westminster model**, the LoP holds the title "**Prime Minister-in-waiting**" and forms a **shadow cabinet**.
- The **shadow cabinet** criticises government policies and offers alternative strategies, mirroring the real cabinet's functions.
- Responsibilities of LoP include **ensuring effective parliamentary functioning, leading debates, demanding accountability** from the government, and upholding democratic norms.

What is the Significance of Opposition in a Democracy Like India?

- **Significant Role of Opposition:**
 - A **constructive opposition** can play a major role in building public opinion against erroneous policies and programmes of the incumbent government.
 - The opposition's primary role involves **reacting, questioning, and scrutinizing the government's actions daily** in parliament, committees, media, and among the public.
 - It ensures the government adheres to **constitutional norms** and critically examines policies and legislation proposed by the ruling party.
 - In parliament, the opposition not only criticizes but also advocates for **constituency-specific needs, proposes amendments, and seeks assurances** using parliamentary procedures.
- **For Improved Parliamentary Functioning:**
 - Presently, the parliamentary functioning faces several challenges which are as follows:
 - **Declining Sittings:** The number of sitting days in recent Lok Sabhas has decreased significantly compared to earlier terms, with the **16th and 17th Lok Sabhas** averaging **66 and 55 days per year**, respectively.
 - **Low Productivity:** Despite more sessions in the **17th Lok Sabha**, productivity in terms of hours spent on legislative work declined sharply. For example, the **2023 Winter Session** saw **only 62 hours** of overall work and **37 hours spent on Bills**, compared to 281 hours and 125 hours in the 2019 Budget Session.
 - **Declining Bill Passage:** The number of Bills passed by the **17th Lok Sabha** showed a **gradual decline** over its 15 sessions, from a peak of 35 Bills in the 2019 Budget Session to just six in the 2023 Budget Session.
 - **Discussion Time:** More than **a third of the Bills** passed in this Lok Sabha underwent less than an hour of discussion, highlighting limited scrutiny.
 - **Declining role of Parliamentary Committees:** In the **17th Lok Sabha**, only **16%** of Bills introduced in Parliament were referred to committees for detailed scrutiny, which is low when compared to earlier Lok Sabhas.
- Strong opposition (with more representation in Parliament) will have **equal stake in ensuring better productivity** of the Parliament and addressing above-mentioned challenges.



What are Present Challenges with Opposition?

▪ Numerical Disadvantage:

- Many opposition parties face the challenge of **lacking sufficient numerical strength** in parliament compared to the ruling party or coalition.
 - For example**, the **16th and 17th Lok Sabhas** had no recognised Leader of Opposition as no party fulfilled the 10% criteria.
- This affects their ability to influence **legislative outcomes, secure committee memberships, and challenge government** policies effectively.
- However, this scenario seems changed in **18th Lok Sabha** but representation of regional parties upto the number of **voicing regional aspirations** is still an issue.

▪ Fragmentation and Ideological Diversity:

- The opposition in India has been **fragmented and poorly organised** which has led to **absence of a common minimum programme** to be raised in and outside the parliament.
- Internal rivalries and lack of cohesion** among opposition leaders can undermine their collective effectiveness in challenging the ruling party.
- Moreover, Indian opposition parties are often fragmented due to **diverse ideologies, regional interests, and agendas** which can lead to difficulty in presenting a **cohesive opposition narrative** and **coordinating unified strategies** against the government.

▪ Prevalence of Vindictive Politics:

- It has been alleged that the ruling party's control over **state institutions, including law enforcement agencies, regulatory bodies, and electoral machinery**, poses challenges for opposition parties.
- This can lead to allegations of **biased enforcement, electoral malpractices, and misuse of state power** to undermine opposition activities.
 - For instance**, according to a petition filed by political parties in the Supreme Court, around **95%** of political leaders investigated by the **Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI)** and [Directorate of Enforcement \(ED\)](#) are opposition leaders.

▪ Financial and Organizational Constraints:

- Opposition parties**, especially smaller ones, often struggle with **limited financial resources and organizational capacity**.
 - For example**, political parties that secured **at least 1% of the votes polled** in the recent General or State Assembly elections were eligible to take donations through [electoral bonds](#) (however, this has been declared unconstitutional by the **Supreme Court**)
- This hampers their ability to **mobilize grassroots support, conduct effective electoral campaigns**, and sustain political activities throughout the electoral cycle.

▪ Limited Access to Media and Public Platforms:

- The ruling party typically enjoys greater access to mainstream media and government-controlled platforms for communication.
- Opposition parties may find it **challenging to disseminate their messages, counter government narratives, and gain equal visibility in public discourse**.

▪ **Legislative and Procedural Hurdles:**

- Opposition parties often face procedural hurdles in parliament, such as **limited speaking time, curtailed debate opportunities, and dismissal of opposition motions.**
- This restricts their ability to **scrutinize legislation, propose amendments, and hold the government accountable effectively.**

Ways Forward:

- **Building Alliances: Strengthening alliances** by opposition parties to collectively increase numerical strength and present a unified front against the ruling party or coalition can help in **voicing concerns of the general public.**
- **Empowering Parliamentary Oversight:** Strengthen parliamentary oversight mechanisms by actively **participating in parliamentary committees, debates, and legislative scrutiny.**
- **Enhancing Organizational Capacity:** Focusing on building robust **organizational structures, enhancing outreach capabilities, and improving grassroots connect.**
- **Equal Media Coverage:** Providing equal coverage by **State owned media channels** such as Doordarshan and All India Radio for political campaigns and advertising.
- **Utilizing Digital and Alternative Media:** Embrace digital platforms and alternative media channels to reach a wider audience with opposition messages.
- **Engaging with Public Opinion:** Prioritize engagement with public opinion through regular interactions, town hall meetings, and public consultations.
- **Advocating Electoral Reforms:** Advocate for electoral reforms that promote transparency, fairness, and equitable access to electoral processes.
 - Reforms such as [State funding of elections](#) as recommended by **Indrajit Gupta Committee** would provide a level playing field for the political parties.

Drishti Mains Question:

Q. How does a robust opposition contribute to effective governance and accountability? Highlight the challenges faced by opposition parties in fulfilling their constitutional role and suggest measures to strengthen their effectiveness in the Indian political context.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

Prelims:

Consider the following statements: (2018)

1. In the first Lok Sabha, the single largest party in the opposition was the Swatantra Party.
2. In the Lok Sabha, a “Leader of the Opposition” was recognised for the first time in 1969.
3. In the Lok Sabha, if a party does not have a minimum of 75 members, its leader cannot be recognised as the Leader of the Opposition.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 and 3 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) 2 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans: (b)

PDF Refernece URL: <https://www.drishtiias.com/printpdf/envisaging-strong-opposition>

