

Role of Youth in Electoral Politics of Bihar: Aspirations and Participation Trends

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Abstract

Youth constitute a critical demographic group in Bihar's political landscape, yet their participation in electoral processes remains complex and uneven. This study examines the aspirations, awareness levels, and participation trends of youth aged 18–40 across six districts of Bihar using a mixed-methods approach that integrates quantitative surveys ($n = 300$) and qualitative interviews ($n = 100$). The findings reveal high levels of political awareness among youth, driven predominantly by digital media exposure, although disparities persist between rural and urban respondents. Voting participation shows substantial variation across age groups, with older youth (26–40 years) exhibiting significantly higher turnout than younger respondents. Migration emerges as a major structural barrier, limiting the ability of many youth to vote regularly. Aspirations have shifted markedly from identity-based politics toward development-focused priorities, including employment generation, educational improvement, transparent governance, and anti-corruption measures. However, despite considerable political interest, formal participation beyond voting—such as involvement in political parties, campaign activities, or leadership roles—remains limited, largely due to distrust in political institutions, socio-economic vulnerability, and perceptions of politics as inaccessible or dominated by established elites. Emerging trends indicate growing digital activism and increasing demand for youth representation in governance. These findings suggest that while Bihar's youth exhibit strong potential to reshape the state's political culture, structural reforms, digital literacy, civic education, and inclusive political opportunities are essential to enhance their engagement. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of youth political behaviour and offers insights for policymakers, electoral bodies, and civil society organizations seeking to strengthen democratic participation in Bihar.

Keywords: Youth, Participation, Electoral Politics, Aspirations, Bihar

1. Introduction

Youth play an indispensable role in shaping democratic governance, particularly in societies where they represent a substantial proportion of the population. Their political engagement—whether through voting, campaigning, political deliberation, or digital participation—serves as a major determinant of democratic vitality and institutional responsiveness. In India, individuals aged 18–40 constitute the largest demographic cohort, capturing nearly 65% of the national population (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation [MOSPI], 2023). Bihar, in particular, stands out as one of the youngest

states demographically, with more than 60% of its population falling within this age bracket (Government of Bihar, 2022). This demographic prominence places the youth at the centre of Bihar's electoral politics, rendering their aspirations, attitudes, and participation trends critical to understanding the state's political direction.

Historically, Bihar has been a politically vibrant landscape marked by mass mobilizations, ideological movements, student politics, and shifting social coalitions. The youth have often been at the forefront of such political transformations—from the JP Movement of the 1970s to changing electoral alliances in the post-Mandal era. However, contemporary youth participation in electoral politics displays a nuanced pattern. While political awareness and issue-based consciousness are rising, formal participation, particularly voting and organizational involvement, remains highly variable (Kumar & Singh, 2021). The age group of 18–40 reflects a diverse population encompassing college students, young professionals, migrant workers, unemployed youth, early-career entrepreneurs, and young homemakers. Each of these subgroups experiences political processes differently, influenced by socio-economic conditions, education, digital exposure, and mobility patterns.

Recent scholarly observations indicate a significant shift from identity-centric politics to development-oriented expectations among young voters, especially in Bihar, where issues such as unemployment, migration, education quality, corruption, and public service delivery dominate youth discourse (Sharma, 2022). Digitalization has also reshaped political participation: platforms like WhatsApp, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram have become crucial spaces for political discussion, campaign mobilization, and opinion formation (Verma, 2020). This transformation reflects a global trend where youth increasingly engage in politics through online activism and informal networks rather than traditional party structures (Norris, 2021).

Despite this growing political consciousness, several structural and systemic barriers continue to restrict meaningful youth participation in Bihar. Economic vulnerabilities, high migration rates, caste hierarchies, lack of inclusive leadership opportunities, limited access to institutional political platforms, and general distrust in political processes often deter consistent engagement (Ahsan, 2019). For migrant youth—constituting a major share of Bihar's workforce—voting becomes challenging due to mobility constraints and inadequate facilitation for absentee voters. Youth from marginalized groups also face barriers due to limited political socialization and lower access to quality education (Jha, 2020).

Although national-level studies provide insights into youth involvement in Indian politics, there remains a notable gap in research specifically addressing Bihar's youth within the extended age group of 18–40. Existing works often overlook the internal diversity of Bihar's youth demographic, the rapidly changing socio-political environment, and the emerging aspirations shaped by digital exposure, migration patterns, and education shifts. Consequently, there is a pressing need for a systematic investigation of youth aspirations, political attitudes, and actual participation trends in the state.

This research aims to bridge this gap by critically examining the roles and expectations of youth aged 18–40 in Bihar's electoral politics. It focuses on understanding levels of political awareness, determinants of voting behaviour, motivations behind participation and non-participation, and the influence of socio-economic, educational, and regional factors. The study further explores how emerging trends—such as digital political engagement, issue-based mobilizations, and shifts in political expectations—are transforming the landscape of youth politics in Bihar. By doing so, this research provides evidence-based insights that can inform policymakers, electoral authorities, political parties,

and civil society organizations seeking to strengthen youth engagement and democratize political participation in the state.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a mixed-methods research design that integrates both quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine the role of youth aged 18–40 in the electoral politics of Bihar. A mixed-methods framework is particularly suitable for political behaviour research because it allows the researcher to capture measurable patterns of political participation as well as subjective perceptions, motivations, and aspirations (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). The study follows a descriptive, analytical, and cross-sectional design, enabling the documentation of existing participation levels and the analysis of relationships between socio-economic characteristics and political behaviours at a single point in time.

The research was conducted across selected districts of Bihar—Patna, Gaya, Muzaffarpur, Bhagalpur, Darbhanga, and Rohtas—chosen to represent the socio-cultural and political diversity of the state. These districts encompass both rural and urban areas, different levels of literacy and employment, and varied historical patterns of political mobilization. This geographical diversity allows for a more comprehensive understanding of youth political engagement. The target population includes youth between the ages of 18 and 40 years, an age range consistent with contemporary demographic classifications used in Indian socio-political research (MOSPI, 2023). This group captures a broad spectrum of youth experiences, including students, early-career professionals, migrant labourers, unemployed individuals, young entrepreneurs, and those engaged in political or civil society activities (Table 1).

A multistage sampling technique was employed to ensure representativeness. In the first stage, districts were purposively selected to reflect regional diversity. In the second stage, stratified random sampling was used to categorize youth populations according to gender, residence, education, and occupation. In the final stage, respondents were selected randomly from each stratum. A total sample of 400 participants was chosen, comprising 300 survey respondents and 100 participants in focus group discussions (FGDs) and interviews. This sample size is adequate for identifying district-level variations and generating meaningful statistical and qualitative insights (Kothari, 2019).

Primary data were collected through structured questionnaires, FGDs, and key informant interviews. The questionnaire consisted of sections on demographic information, political awareness, voting behaviour, political aspirations, and participation in both online and offline political activities. Both closed-ended and open-ended questions were included to capture quantitative measures and personal perspectives. FGDs were conducted in each district with groups of 8–10 youth to explore themes such as political trust, expectations from governance, and experiences with mobilization. Additionally, key informant interviews were held with youth leaders, political workers, college teachers, civil society representatives, and election officials to provide deeper contextual understanding of youth engagement trends. Secondary data were obtained from government reports, Election Commission records, census publications, academic literature, and media analyses, which helped support and triangulate the primary data.

The research instruments used in the study were carefully developed to ensure validity and reliability. The questionnaire was reviewed by political science experts to ensure content validity, and a pilot study involving 30 respondents was conducted to refine the items. Reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, with a threshold of 0.70 considered acceptable for internal consistency (Tavakol & Dennick,

2011). Semi-structured interview and FGD guides were prepared to facilitate deeper exploration of emerging themes.

Data analysis involved both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Quantitative data were processed using SPSS and Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, means, and percentages were used to summarize youth participation patterns. Inferential analyses, including chi-square tests and correlation analyses, were implemented to examine associations between awareness, socio-economic variables, and political behaviour. Graphical representations such as bar charts, pie charts, and trend lines were used to visually illustrate findings. Qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis following grounded theory principles (Charmaz, 2014). Interview and FGD transcripts were coded to identify recurring themes related to political aspirations, digital engagement, motivations, trust, and barriers to participation.

Ethical considerations were strictly followed throughout the research. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study and provided consent before participation. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured, and respondents were given the freedom to withdraw from the study at any point. Sensitive political questions were handled with care to avoid discomfort or potential risks. The data collected were used exclusively for academic research and stored securely to protect participant privacy.

Despite meticulous planning, certain methodological limitations remain. Self-reported data may be influenced by recall bias or social desirability bias. Accessing migrant youth posed challenges, which may have led to their underrepresentation. Additionally, the cross-sectional nature of the study restricts the ability to capture changing political attitudes over time. However, the use of triangulation, expert-validated tools, and mixed methods strengthens the credibility and robustness of the findings.

Table 1. This table presents an overview of the methodological framework adopted for the study, including the research design, study area, sampling procedures, data collection methods, analytical tools, and ethical considerations.

Component	Description
Research Design	Mixed-methods (quantitative + qualitative); descriptive, analytical, cross-sectional
Study Area	Selected districts of Bihar: Patna, Gaya, Muzaffarpur, Bhagalpur, Darbhanga, Rohtas
Target Population	Youth aged 18–40 years (students, professionals, migrants, unemployed, entrepreneurs)
Sampling Technique	Multistage sampling: (1) Purposive district selection, (2) Stratified random sampling by gender, residence, education, occupation, (3) Simple random sampling
Sample Size	400 total participants: 300 survey respondents; 100 for FGDs and interviews
Primary Data Collection Methods	Structured questionnaires, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)
Secondary Data Sources	Government reports (ECI, Census), academic journals, books, NGO reports, media articles
Research Instruments	Questionnaire (demographics, awareness, behaviour, aspirations), semi-structured interview guides, FGD guides

Quantitative Tools	Analysis	SPSS, MS Excel; descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, correlation analysis, graphical representation
Qualitative Tools	Analysis	Thematic analysis using grounded theory principles; coding of transcripts
Validity Measures		Expert review for content validity, pilot testing with 30 participants
Reliability Measures		Cronbach's alpha (≥ 0.70) for internal consistency
Ethical Considerations		Informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, careful handling of sensitive political questions
Methodological Limitations		Self-report bias, limited access to migrant youth, cross-sectional design limits changes over time

RESULTS

Demographic Profile of Respondents

The study draws upon responses from 300 surveyed youth and 100 qualitative participants aged 18–40 across six socio-politically diverse districts of Bihar. The demographic findings reveal a balanced distribution across age and gender categories, demonstrating the representativeness of the sample. Nearly 41% belonged to the 18–25 age group, suggesting a high presence of early youth transitioning into adulthood; 33% were in the 26–30 range, and 26% were between 31–40 years. This distribution ensures that the study captures the differing political experiences across early youth, emerging adults, and mature youth populations.

Gender representation included 54% men, 45% women, and 1% identifying as others. The majority of respondents (58%) hailed from rural areas, reflecting Bihar's largely rural demographic, while 42% resided in urban/semi-urban regions. Educational attainment also varied, with 32% having completed higher secondary schooling, 40% holding undergraduate degrees, and 28% possessing postgraduate or professional qualifications. Occupational classification showed that 38% were students, 29% employed, 21% unemployed, and 12% were migrant workers or returnees. Collectively, this diverse demographic profile provides a robust foundation for analyzing political engagement and aspirations among Bihar's youth.

Political Awareness Among Youth

Political awareness emerged as a key strength among respondents, with data indicating that youth in Bihar possess considerable exposure to political information. As shown in **Figure 1**, 72% of respondents reported being aware of major political parties and their ideological positions, while 68% demonstrated familiarity with essential electoral processes such as voter registration, voting procedures, and election bodies. Notably, digital platforms played a central role—61% identified social media as their primary source of political information, surpassing traditional outlets like television (22%), interpersonal channels (10%), and newspapers (7%).

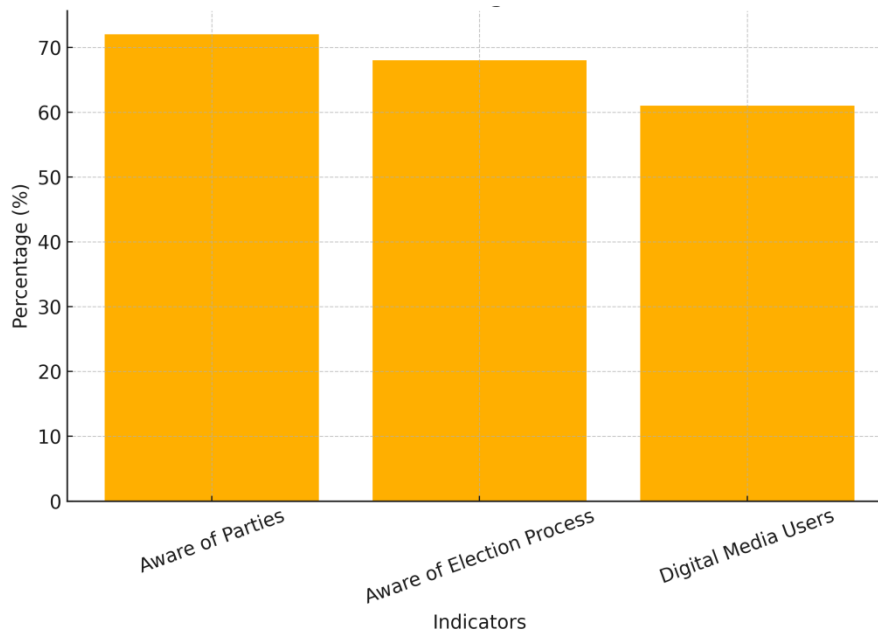


Figure 1. This figure illustrates the percentage of respondents aware of major political parties, the election process, and those who primarily use digital media as their source of political information.

The results indicate a high level of awareness, with digital platforms serving as the dominant medium for political socialization.

Awareness was significantly higher among urban respondents (79%) than rural respondents (65%), indicating uneven access to information ecosystems. Educational attainment strongly influenced awareness levels, with those holding postgraduate degrees showing the highest levels (85%). Qualitative insights reveal that youth perceive political information on social media as more immediate, engaging, and relatable than mainstream media. However, several participants expressed concern over misinformation, signaling the need for digital literacy.

Voting Behaviour and Participation Patterns

Voting participation among youth displayed considerable variation across age groups. As depicted in **Figure 2**, overall 64% of respondents reported voting in at least one previous election. Youth aged 26–40 demonstrated significantly higher participation (71%) compared to the 18–25 cohort (53%), suggesting a maturity effect where political engagement grows with age, responsibility, and socio-economic stability.

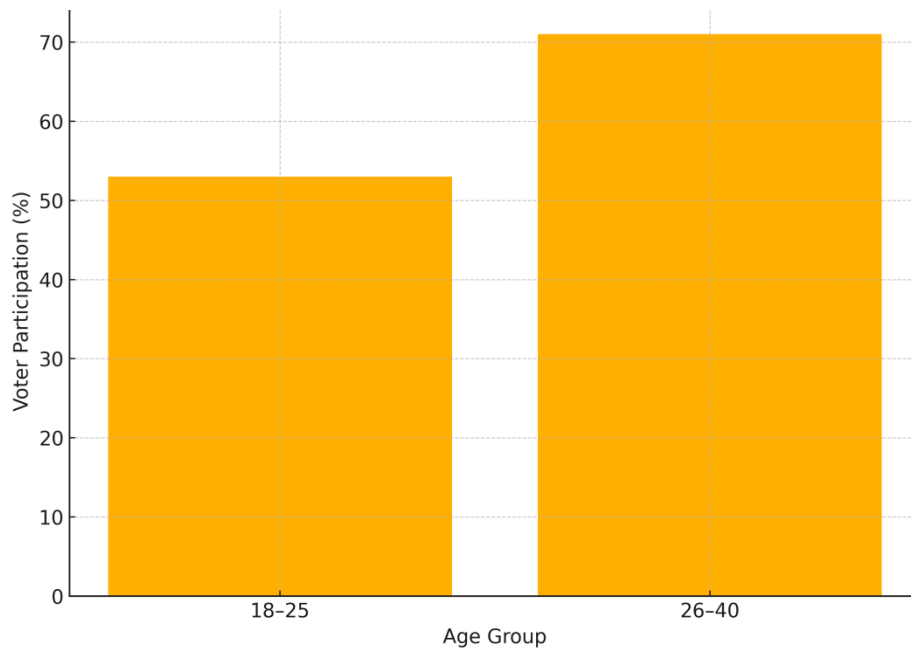


Figure 2. The graph show the voting participation between two age groups: 18–25 and 26–40. The older youth group (26–40) shows significantly higher voter turnout, suggesting increased civic responsibility with age.

Migration emerged as a major barrier—only 29% of migrant youth were able to cast their votes due to work-related displacement and lack of absentee voting provisions. Voting motivations also showed clear issue-based tendencies: 48% voted for development agendas (employment, infrastructure, education), while 27% favoured candidates’ personality traits and credibility. Party loyalty influenced 16% of respondents, and only 9% acknowledged voting based on caste or community—indicating a slow but observable shift away from identity politics.

Among the 36% non-voters, multiple reasons were cited: distrust in political institutions (31%), absence from constituency due to migration or work (28%), lack of awareness about voter processes (17%), political apathy (14%), and family or social restrictions (10%). The qualitative interviews revealed that many youth perceive politics as “untrustworthy” or “not transparent,” which reduces willingness to participate.

Youth Aspirations and Expectations from Politics

The aspirations of Bihar’s youth indicate a clear preference for development-focused governance. Employment emerged as the most critical demand, with 76% considering job creation the top political priority. This is closely linked to Bihar’s longstanding challenge of youth unemployment and outmigration. Additionally, 63% emphasized improving education quality, particularly in higher education and vocational training sectors. Transparency and anti-corruption measures were highlighted by 58% of respondents, and 42% stressed the need for infrastructure development.

Qualitative interviews revealed deep-seated frustration among youth regarding perceived inefficiencies in governance. Several participants expressed dissatisfaction with leaders who make promises but fail to execute development projects. Notably, 67% of respondents strongly believed that youth representation in politics is insufficient, arguing that younger leaders could bring innovation, accountability, and fresh

perspectives. This sentiment suggests a potential shift toward generational renewal in Bihar’s political landscape.

Participation Beyond Voting

The results indicate that while voting is the most common form of political engagement, youth participation beyond voting remains relatively limited. Only 18% reported involvement in offline political activities such as attending rallies, joining political parties, or engaging in student activism. Gender differences were visible, with 23% of men involved in political activities compared to only 12% of women. However, digital political engagement demonstrated significantly higher participation levels, with 52% of respondents reporting involvement in online political discussions, sharing political content, or following political influencers.

The 18–25 age group showed the highest digital activism, reflecting their familiarity with social media and online spaces. Despite this, only 9% expressed interest in formally joining a political party, and just 4% indicated willingness to contest elections. The qualitative insights suggest that many youth view formal politics as “closed,” “hierarchical,” and “dominated by established families,” discouraging new entrants.

Barriers to Youth Participation

As summarized in Figure 3, youth political engagement is hindered by a range of barriers. Distrust in political institutions (31%) topped the list, followed by migration-related constraints (28%), limited political awareness (17%), and general political apathy (14%). Social pressures, particularly caste-based expectations and restrictive family norms, also played a role—especially among rural and female respondents.

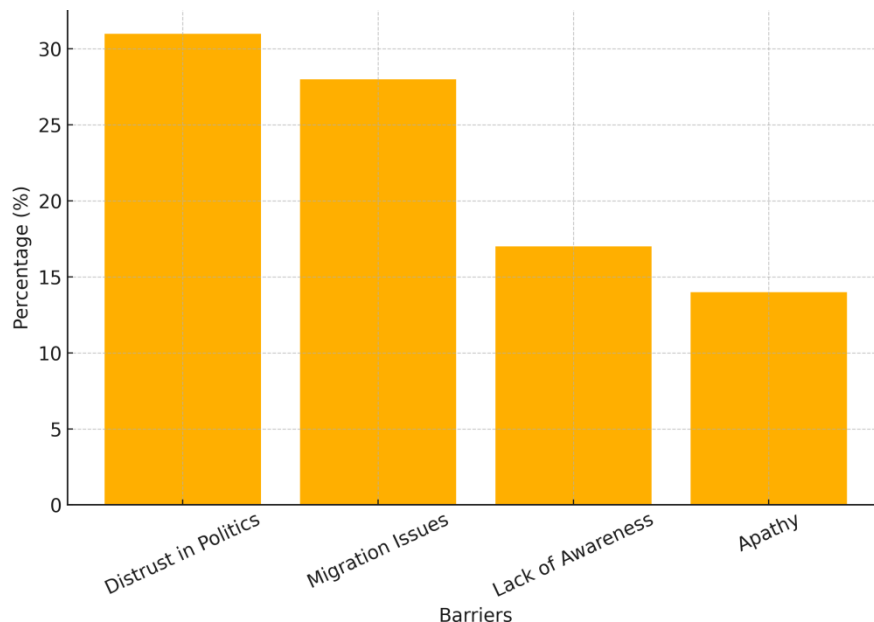


Figure 3. The graph highlights the main factors preventing youth from voting or engaging in politics, including distrust in political institutions, migration-related challenges, lack of awareness, and political apathy.

Economic vulnerability, particularly unemployment, was frequently cited during qualitative interviews. Many respondents stated that the daily struggle for livelihood reduced their capacity to focus on political participation. Additionally, structural issues such as the dominance of traditional political elites and limited youth-specific platforms were highlighted as key barriers. Several respondents noted the absence of accessible leadership opportunities, leading to disillusionment and disengagement.

Emerging Trends in Youth Political Engagement

Despite facing numerous barriers, Bihar's youth are demonstrating emerging trends that highlight their evolving relationship with politics. The most significant trend is the rise of digital political participation. Approximately 71% reported relying on social media for political updates and debates, indicating that online platforms have become primary sites of political socialization. Youth-driven digital activism is expanding, especially around issues like employment, corruption, and public service delivery.

Another notable trend is the gradual shift from identity-based politics to issue-based preferences. Educated and urban youth, in particular, demonstrated a strong inclination toward governance quality, transparency, and merit-based leadership. Interest in civic education, volunteerism, and community-based political activities is rising, although still limited. These emerging patterns suggest a potential reconfiguration of Bihar's political culture, driven by new aspirations and digital connectivity.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlight both the dynamism and contradictions inherent in youth political participation in Bihar. Youth aged 18–40 exhibit substantial levels of political awareness, largely driven by digital media exposure, yet their actual participation in formal political processes remains limited. This duality reflects a well-documented gap between awareness and engagement observed in youth democracies worldwide (Norris, 2021). The extensive use of digital platforms—especially among urban and educated respondents—indicates that Bihar's youth are increasingly integrating political content into their everyday digital routines, shaping their perceptions of governance and political accountability. This transformation mirrors the national trend in India, where social media has emerged as a major force influencing political campaigns and public opinion (Verma, 2020). However, the digital divide between rural and urban Bihar still persists, contributing to uneven political awareness.

The study's results on voting behaviour reflect both continuity with past electoral patterns and signs of evolution. Voting turnout was significantly higher among the 26–40 age group compared to younger respondents (18–25 years). This inter-cohort difference resonates with previous research that younger voters often express interest in politics but do not translate this interest into actual voting (Sharma, 2022). One explanation could be the developmental tasks and life transitions characteristic of early adulthood, such as higher education, job searching, and mobility, which may reduce the salience of voting. Migration emerged as a particularly significant obstacle, with many respondents citing work-related relocation as a major reason for not voting. Bihar has one of the highest inter-state migration rates in India, and this socio-economic pattern poses a structural barrier to regular electoral participation (Ahsan, 2019). The absence of absentee voting mechanisms for migrant workers continues to disenfranchise a large segment of the youth population.

A major finding of this study is the clear shift in youth aspirations from identity-based politics toward development-centric political expectations. The strong emphasis on employment, quality education, anti-corruption measures, and infrastructure development indicates that socioeconomic concerns now form

the core of youth political consciousness. This shift aligns with theoretical expectations of modernization and political socialization, which suggest that as literacy, media exposure, and economic aspirations rise, citizens tend to prioritize performance-based governance (Norris, 2021). Bihar's youth, therefore, appear to be moving away from traditional determinants of political behaviour—such as caste, religion, and hereditary leadership—which historically shaped the state's electoral politics. This change, though gradual, reflects an important generational transformation that could influence future political alignments.

Despite positive trends in awareness and aspirations, the study reveals a significant deficiency in formal political engagement beyond voting. Only a small fraction of youth reported involvement in political campaigns, party work, or student activism. This low level of structured participation aligns with the civic voluntarism model proposed by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995), which posits that individuals refrain from political activity due to limited resources, inadequate psychological engagement, or lack of recruitment networks. Many respondents cited the perception of politics as inaccessible and controlled by established political elites, often referred to as “dynastic politics.” This perception is supported by earlier research highlighting the dominance of political families in Indian electoral politics and the limited opportunities afforded to new entrants (Jha, 2020). Such structural barriers discourage youth from entering formal political roles, even when they possess strong political awareness and leadership potential.

The barriers to participation identified in this study also reinforce concerns raised by scholars about democratic disengagement. Distrust in political institutions—reported by nearly one-third of respondents—reflects a deeper skepticism toward governance mechanisms. This distrust can result from repeated exposure to corruption, unfulfilled political promises, and perceived inefficiencies in public service delivery. Such sentiments, if left unaddressed, may lead to long-term disengagement from democratic processes. Migration, economic vulnerability, and family restrictions further compound the challenges, revealing that political participation is deeply embedded within socio-economic structures. For women and marginalized communities, the barriers are even more pronounced, echoing previous findings on gendered and caste-based political constraints in Bihar (Kumar & Singh, 2021).

Nevertheless, the study identifies encouraging emerging trends that reveal the future direction of youth political engagement. Digital activism is gaining momentum, allowing young voters to participate in political debates, express concerns, and support campaigns without entering formal political spaces. This shift represents a global pattern where youth increasingly favour informal and issue-based political participation over party-centered involvement (Norris, 2021). Additionally, the demand for greater youth representation signals a generational push for political renewal. Many participants argued that young leaders are more likely to understand contemporary socio-economic challenges and can bring innovation, transparency, and accountability to governance. This aspiration reflects a normative expectation of participatory democracy, where citizens seek leaders who mirror their demographic and ideological values.

Taken together, the findings suggest that Bihar stands at a transitional point in its political evolution. Youth possess the potential to reshape electoral politics, but structural reforms, political openness, and targeted engagement strategies are necessary to actualize this potential. Strengthening civic education, improving digital literacy, promoting youth leadership programs, and implementing voting reforms for migrant workers could significantly enhance youth participation. Ultimately, the study underscores the

need for political institutions, civil society, and policymakers to recognize youth not merely as voters but as partners in governance and agents of democratic transformation.

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