

**USE AND ABUSE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE  
ELECTIONS:**

# **A STUDY OF BIHAR ASSEMBLY ELECTION 2020**



## **Report by :**

Institute for Governance, Policies & Politics (IGPP)  
in collaboration with  
Social Media Matters

## **Design by :**

Afreen

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office@igpp.in | www.igpp.in

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# Background of the Study

Social media has become an inseparable part of our social life. Despite being a phenomenon that is hardly a decade old has marked its imprint in all aspects of our lives; Be it the public, or the private, the social, the political. With its unmatched capacity to rich out, this has become one of the most crucial vehicles of mass communication in today's order.

Politics, being one of the most alive and contested fields of interpersonal communication, is easily discernible to map the possible reasons behind the use of social media by the political parties and their propaganda setups. In a thin duration of time, social media strategies have become instrumental to the campaign strategies of all the mainstream political parties in India, and outside. Political parties have started hiring professionals to take care of their social media presence. 'Status messages' of important persons have become as authentic as statements made in press conferences.

On the other hand, on the demand side of it, the ever-decreasing price of internet data, accompanied by the enhanced affordability of devices like tablets and smartphones, the demand for social media presence has swelled exponentially. This multitude of an incessant supply of contents, made available in a varied spectrum of formats, has created an insatiable desire for content consumption and public scrutiny, to the extent that any miscalculated step may cause irreparable damage to the public image of a political personality.

Another very important and concurrent aspect of social media and politics is the power of social media to sway people's minds in favour of one person or party through its covert campaigns and strategies. This aspect has been the point of contention in recent times from the presidential elections of 2016 in the US to local elections in many parts of the underdeveloped world. This aspect has given social media a status of 'necessary evil' in today's world driven by big tech and new communication.

Bihar being the state which has been called as cradle of democracy because of its ancient historical linkages to the Lichchvi Ganarajya, is very important in this journey of democracy. The tech has now been abused to undermine democracy and this is happening everywhere in the everyday life of each one of us. This aspect of big tech and social media needs to be scrutinised and checked. The intensity of this matter has increased manifold in these pandemic times when things are moving online very fast. Even in small towns and villages, online activities are becoming possible and people are adapting to them.

In the context of the ongoing lockdown caused by the ongoing pandemic, the impact of social media has multiplied.

**This year Bihar Vidhan Sabha election is scheduled to be held during October-November. In this backdrop, it has become interesting to see the probable and possible expanded role of social media that it would play in this election. One of the major parties has already held its virtual rally eyeing this forthcoming election in Bihar.**

**It may be argued that a virtual rally may not necessarily fall under the category of social media, in a watertight definition. But in a larger perspective, it gives us a vantage point where we can look into this shift in the patterns of electioneering in India, which, hitherto was strictly human interaction intensive, but has opened up itself to considerably greater incorporation of virtual alternatives.**

**Observers, both from the fields of electoral strategies and social media usage, alike, have started arguing that the upcoming Bihar Vidhan Sabha Election is going to be a watershed moment in the history of electioneering in India, because of the intensity of use of social media in it. Some of the experts have gone to the extent of claiming that this election would be the first of its kind that would be contested over social media.**

**At the same time, it is important to take care of the fact that in recent years, even with the limited use of social media in electioneering and propaganda, we have been subjected to experience several cases of abuse of these media. Because of its decentralised nature and amorphous character, it often becomes near impossible to find the source of an information. Because of this characteristic, social media has been extensively used to spread fake news, misinformation, politically tailored version of incidents, and hate speech in India and elsewhere. Capitalising on the lack of source traceability, the life span, speed, and longevity of hate campaigns, rumors, have expounded astronomically, while culpability for perpetration has dwindled at an inversely proportional rate.**

**Besides, in a country like India, the question of the digital divide remains a burning question. According to an estimate cited by Statista, by 2022, India is expected to have 44.2 Crore (442 million) smartphone users. This shows that almost half the population of India is left beyond the scope of the digital rich.**

**Despite the crosscurrents of all these arguments, social media is certainly going to have a much larger imprint on the upcoming Vidhan Sabha Election in Bihar. We take this opportunity to test the possibility, viability, veracity, and authenticity of these arguments.**

# Objectives of the Study

As broadly laid out in the previous section, we proposed the following points to be the objective of our study:

- To study the major area of uses of social media in political campaign/propaganda in general and electoral campaign/propaganda in particular.
- To map the enhanced possibility of usage of social media electoral propaganda in the period of lockdown during Bihar Election.
- To locate the penetration of social media vis-a-vis the widespread digital divide in the state of Bihar.
- To map the use and misuse including breach of privacy and safety of netizens, especially through the following lenses,
  - Privacy and safety issue of woman leaders/workers particularly.
  - Trolling behaviour as well as the negative image portrayal/ labelling.
  - The cyber harassment faced by women leaders and activists.
  - The operational procedure of the fake accounts.
- To trace a possible working solution to contain the abuses regarding privacy and safety of citizens.
- To check if social media practices and campaigns are in semblance with the election commissions model code of conduct for social media.

# Research Questions

Based on the objectives delimited in the previous section the study would like to answer the following research questions:

- What are the special characteristics of social media campaigns in this election that may make it distinct from other elections of the past?
- How the enhanced importance of social media is going to impact the Bihar assembly election?
- What is the expected reach of the social media campaign in Bihar?
- Is there any section that may be left out of the political debate because of the enhanced use of social media?
- What are the possible reasons behind those who would be left behind?
- Do you think social media campaign gives advantage and disadvantage to certain political parties and individuals?
- What are the reasons behind the abuse of social media in a political campaign?
- What are the different patterns of abuses in the cyber campaign?
  - > Privacy.
  - > Trolling.
  - > Cyber sexual harassment of women activists.
  - > What is the possible way that can be followed to contain those abuses?
- Are there any awareness about the privacy and data usage policies of social media platforms among political parties and workers?
- Are voters aware of their rights about their data and the way data will be used by political parties in these campaigns?



# Research Methodology

The study employed a mixed-method strategy for the data gathering in the field, which contains a combination of primary data collection and a secondary survey of the literature, based on desk research.

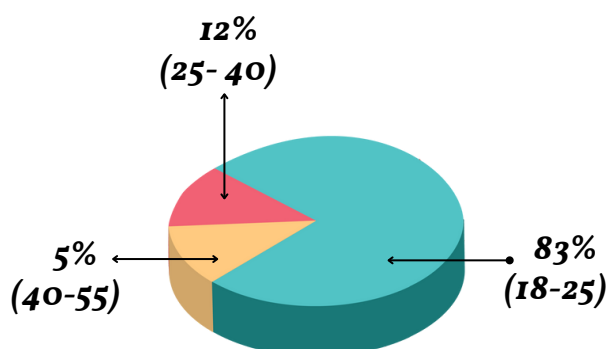
## Qualitative Method

The qualitative approach was employed to map the stakeholders and the experts working in the area. They were able to gather some information through Key Informant Interviews (KII) with some of the major stakeholders.

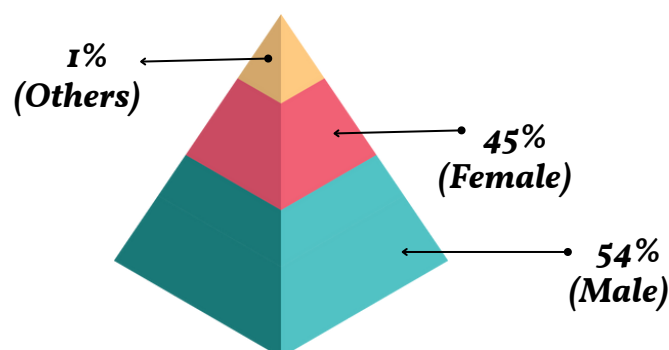
## Quantitative Method

For quantitative, we had conducted an online survey of the voters in Bihar. The sample design was done considering the regional, gender, and spatial diversity, in order to best represent a true representation of the popular opinion. The collected data is analysed to triangulate information. Some of the basic composition of the sample are presented in the figures below.

**Figure 1: Age Composition of the Sample**

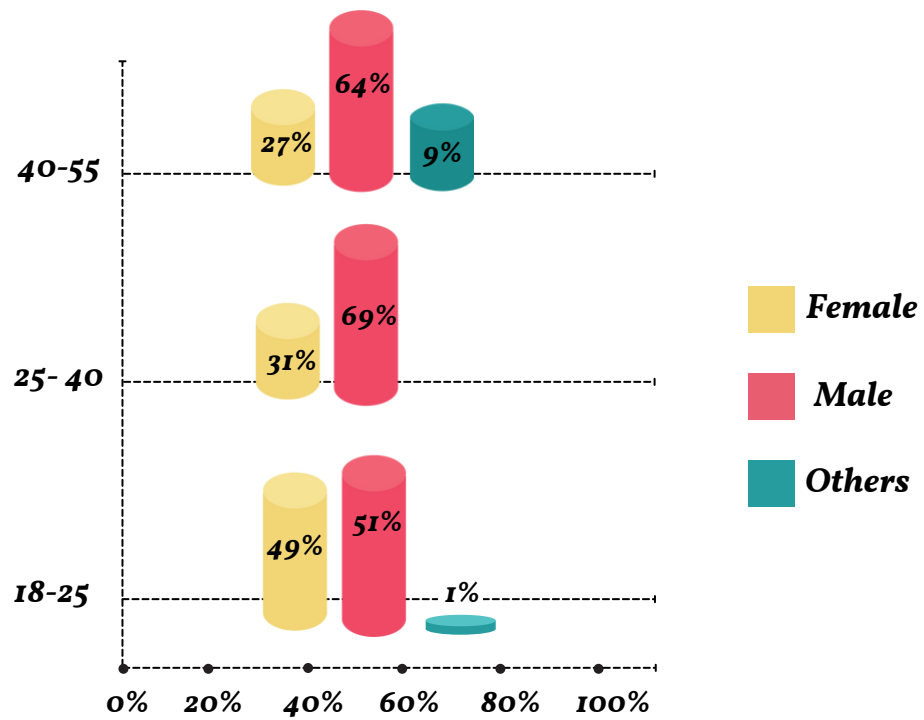


**Figure 2: Gender Composition of the Sample**

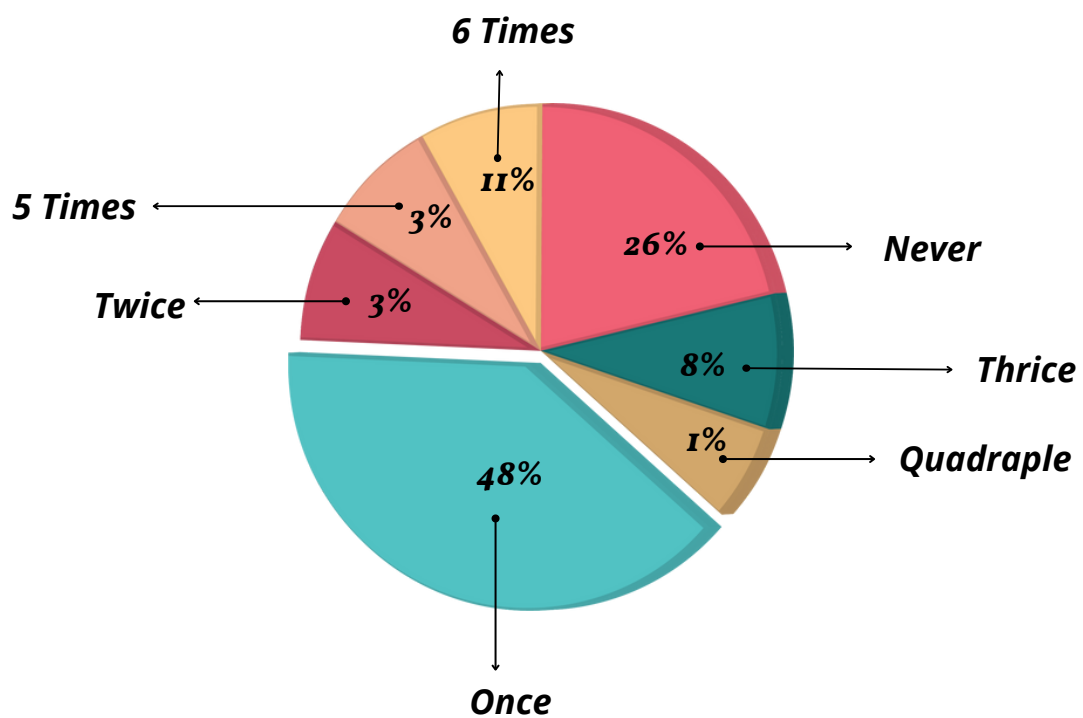


The above figures show the age and gender composition of the people who participated in the survey. We can see that around 83 percent of the people who participated in the survey are within the 18-25 age group. The population is basically the first or second-time voters (Figure 4) of the state assembly and heavy users of social media in their day to day lives. The political parties aimed to influence the first time voter or young voters through various social media platforms.

**Figure 3: Gender Age Group Breakup of the Sample**



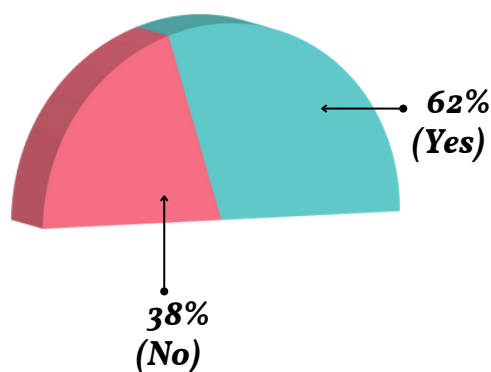
**Figure 4: Number of Elections Participated**



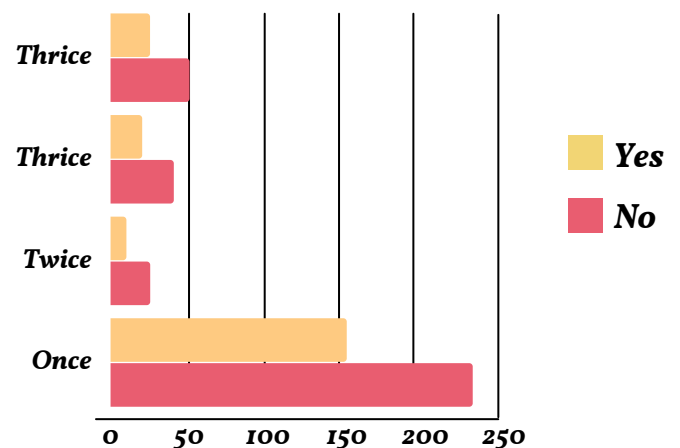
# The Major Findings of the Study

The study of social media use in the recent Bihar election reveals several new facts about the perception of young as well as old voters. Every major political party that participated in the Bihar assembly election used social media as a tool for the campaign, but the volume of their advertisement varies from national parties to state parties. As per our sample population, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) is the most active in social media. However, the BJP's alliance partner JD(U) had a very limited presence in the social media campaign (figure 10). The data analysis reveals that most of the first and second-time voters, specifically the age group of 18- 25 opinioned that social media has been changing the election campaigns and it will be one of the decisive factors in the winning of the election in the near future (Figure 6). Most of the participants of the study believed that social media was one of the important tools in the campaigning process in the recent Bihar election (Figure 7 & Figure 8).

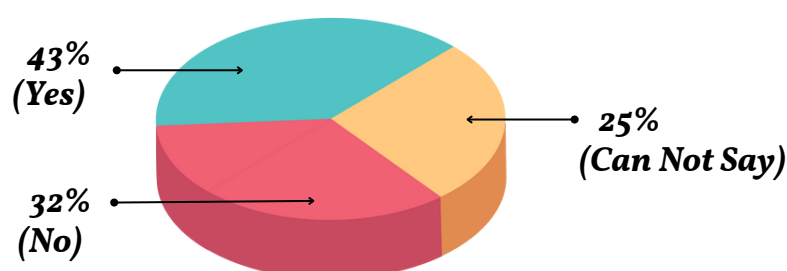
**Figure 5: Perception of Social Media Changing Electioneering**



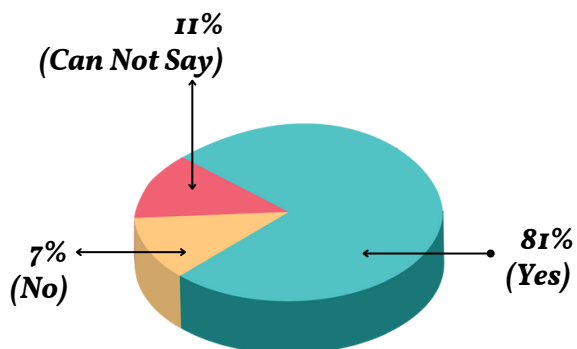
**Figure 6: Perception of Social Media changing Electioneering (According to the Voting Frequency)**



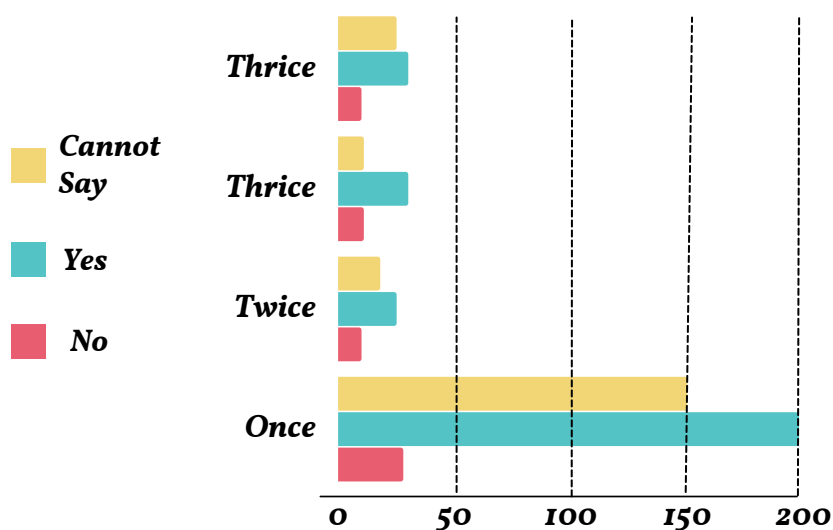
**Figure 7: Perception of Social Media being Decisive in Bihar Election**



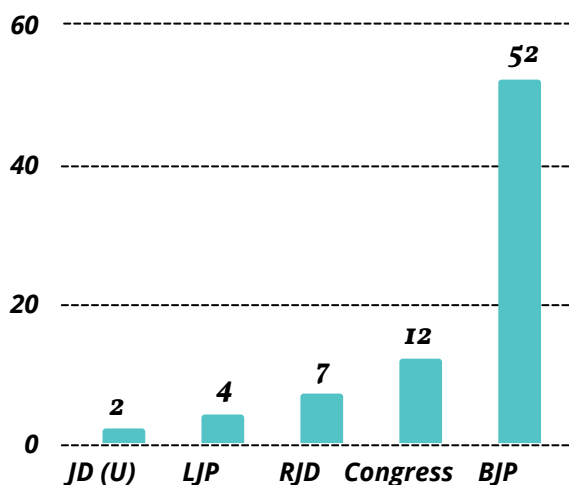
**Figure 8: Perception that Use of SM would change the Elections in the Future**



**Figure 9: Perception that Use of SM would change the Elections in the Future (According to the Voting )**



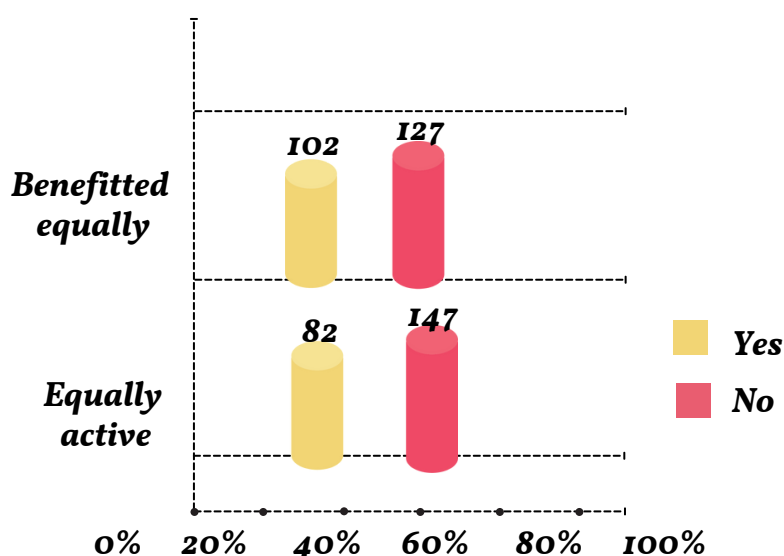
**Figure 10: Party using SM most Intensively (in %)**



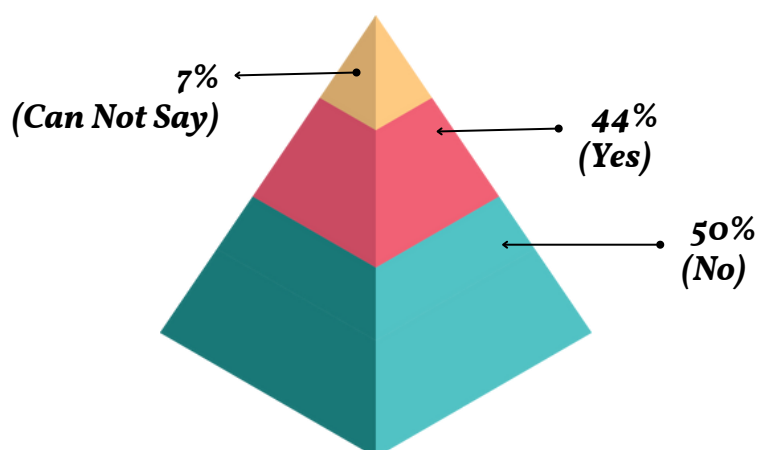
Apart from social media and its usage in the election process, the study also tried to investigate the participant's awareness about data privacy and use of their personal data in the election campaigning by the different political parties. In addition, the study also tried to get an opinion about the equal access of social media among different classes of voters in Bihar in particular and India in general.

In this above context, the study found that more than 50 percent of the sample participants' opined about the digital divide that exist and people do not have equal access to technology or social media (Figure 14). Social media usage is only limited to some section of the population. The study reveals that most of the participants of the study are not aware of data privacy and they have a very limited idea about how different political parties are using their personal data in their election campaigning (Figure 12 & Figure 13). The non-awareness about data privacy could be fine in all the age groups.

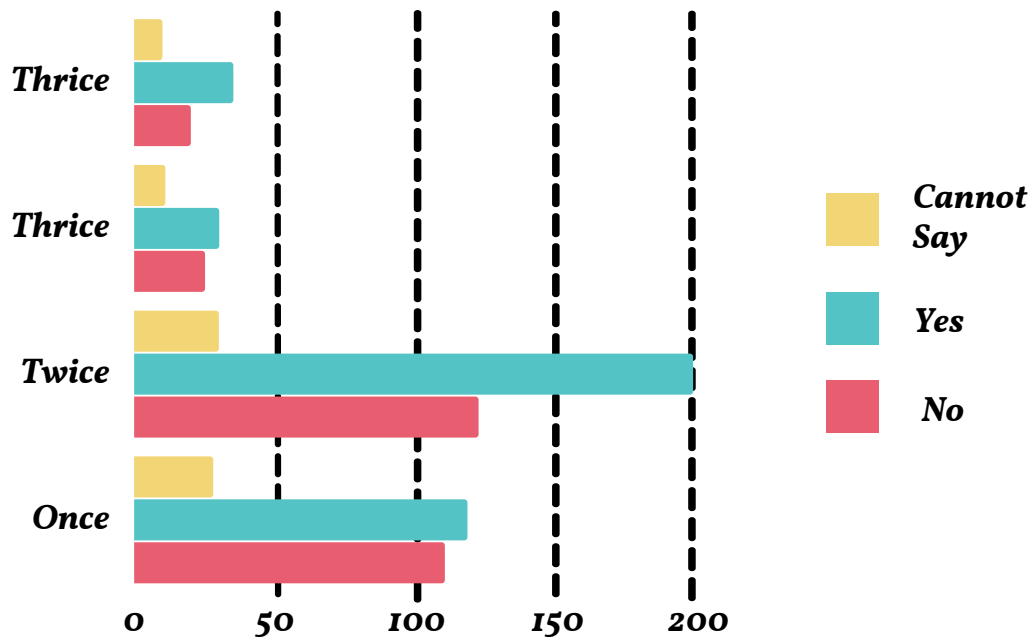
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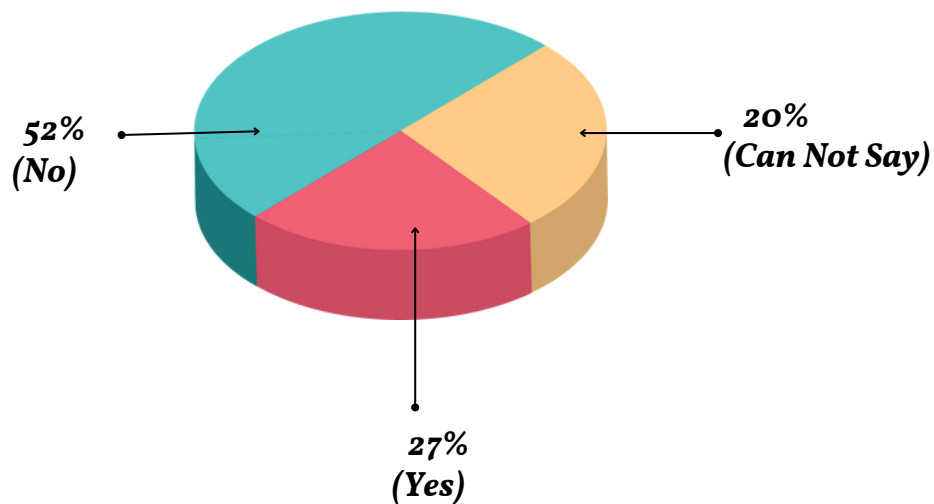
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**Figure 13: Awareness about the Privacy of their Data being used for the Campaign (according to the voting frequency)**



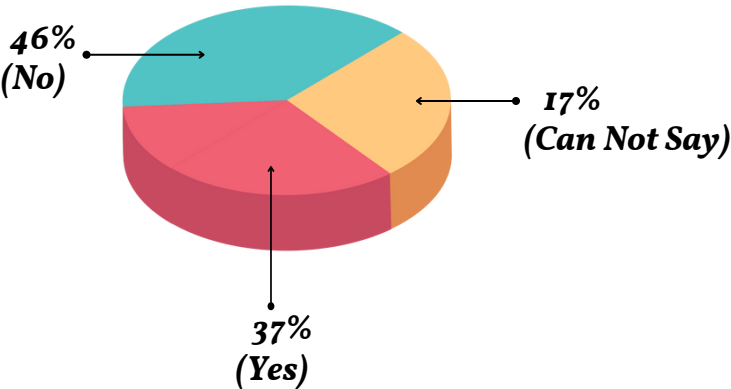
**Figure 14: Everybody has Equal Access to Social Media**



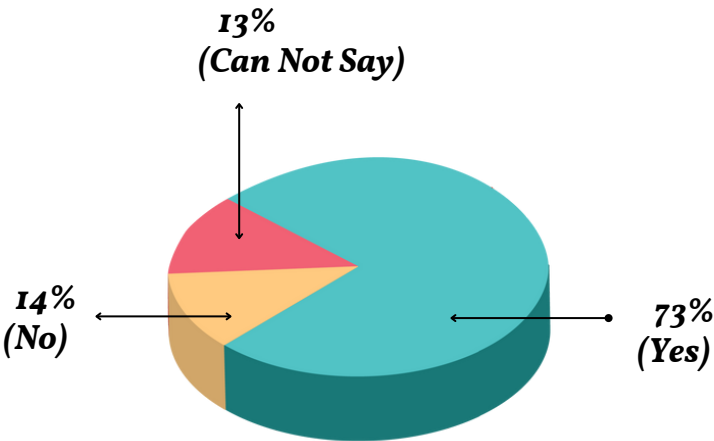
Most of the participants are also of the opinion that everyone is not equally benefited from the increased use of social media. There is a prevalence of fake news in social media during the election and more than 70 percent of the sample population are well aware of the use of fake news in the election for propaganda (Figure 16).

In addition to the fake news, people are of the opinion that in recent years with the increasing use of social media there is an increase in the breach of personal privacy and security (Figure 17). Further, it has also led to the intimidation of several users who are most active on social media. The intimidation has also created a serious problem for the women social media users in several parts of Bihar as well as India (Figure 19). The data shows that half of the sample population believes that an increase in social media use in the political arena has created this atmosphere. In this context, women users are most vulnerable and the intimidation towards women users has been increasing.

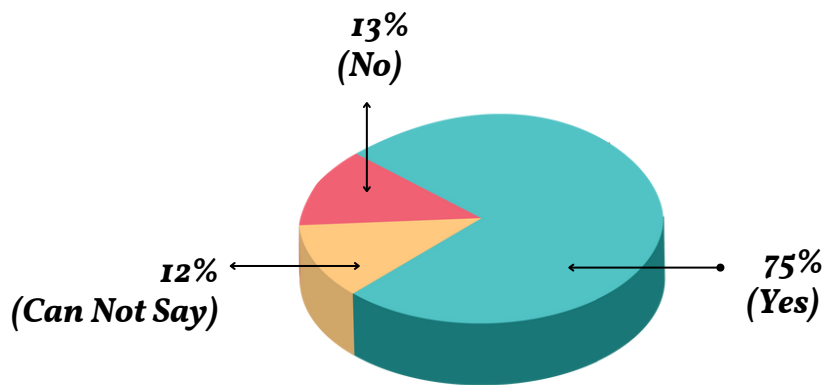
**Figure 15: All citizens would not Equally Benefit from this Increased use of Social Media**



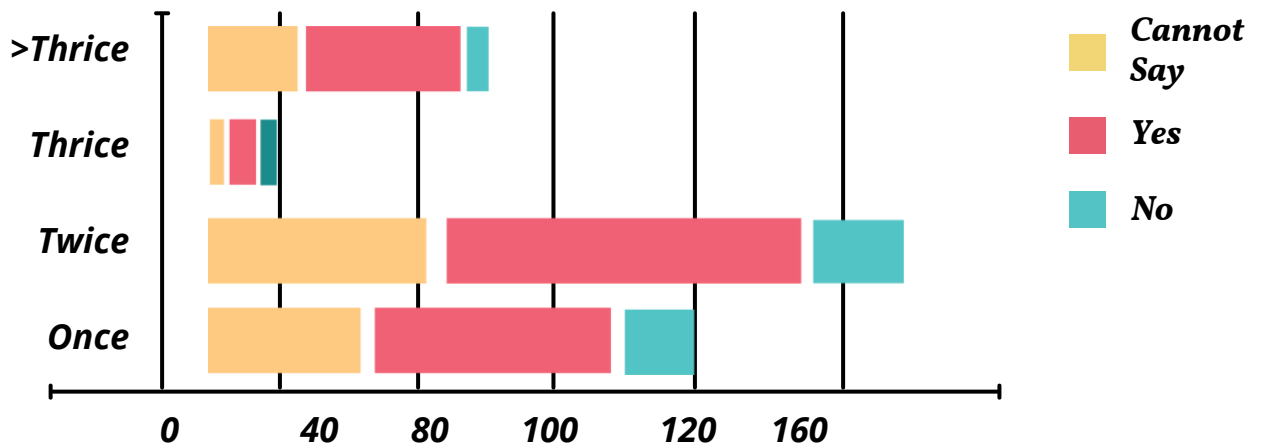
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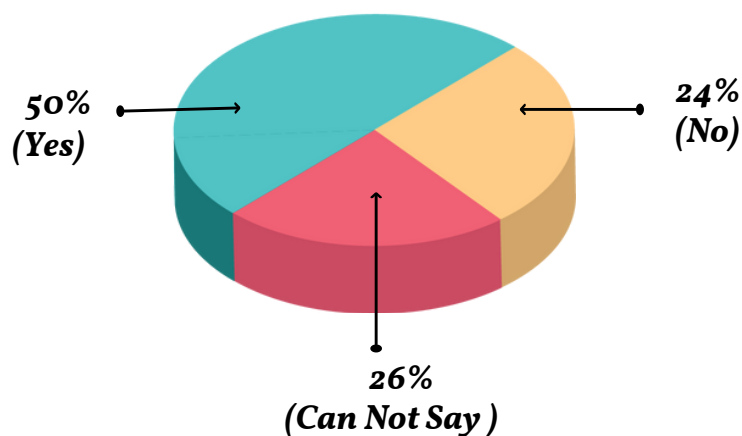
**Figure 17: Increase in Breach of Privacy in Recent Years**



**Figure 18: Increase in Breach of Privacy in Recent Years  
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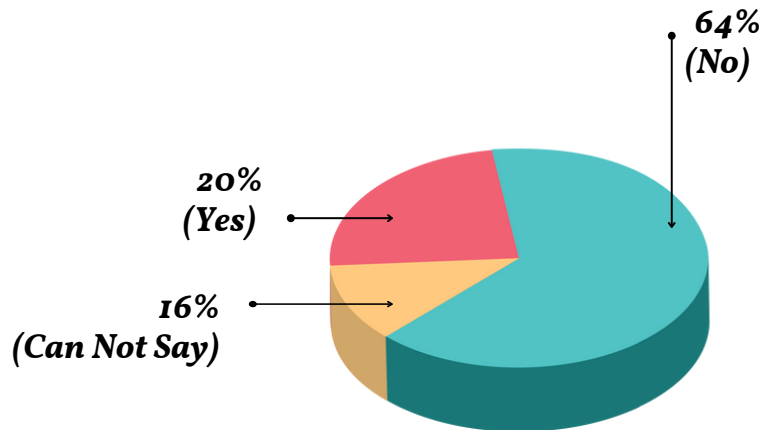


**Figure 19: Increase in Intimidation of Women**





**Figure 20: Enough done by the Social Media Platforms to Check this Problem**



As mentioned above fake news and intimidation have been increasing with the use of social media platforms in political campaigning. Social media companies are trying to curb the problem of fake news, verbal abuses, and the number of intimidations technically. In this context, the study tries to find out people's opinions about the efforts of social media companies to eradicate these serious issues. The study found that more than 60 percent of the sample population believes that social media companies are not doing enough to check this problem.

# Concluding Remarks

**The study provides insights into the perception of the young voters about social media use in the electioneering process in Bihar particular and India in general. The study has tried to cover some of the important issues in social media use and fake news, data privacy, intimidation. The study concludes that social media is going to be a big influencer in the future election specifically for young voters. It can also be concluded that with the rise of social media campaigning the incidence of fake news, breach of privacy, and intimidation will also increase. To curb these issues we need a strong commitment and concrete efforts from both policymakers as well as social media platforms. We need laws as well as tech solutions to prevent the abuses that users face on social media platforms. In addition, we also need large scale campaigns to aware people of how to use social media responsibly for social change in a positive way.**

