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Critical Issues: A Decade of Local Politics Research in Global Bibliometric Analysis

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ABSTRACT - This study maps and diagnoses global research trends in local politics using bibliometric methods to clarify how the field has evolved and where it is heading. Its novelty lies in combining VOSviewer network visualization with Bibliometrix performance and thematic analyses on a large Scopus-indexed corpus, enabling an integrated view of intellectual structure, collaboration patterns, and emerging topics. The urgency of this work stems from the growing policy relevance of local governance amid decentralization pressures, democratic backsliding, and demands for accountability and citizen participation, which require evidence-based synthesis beyond fragmented case studies. We conducted a qualitative literature study supported by bibliometric analysis of 1,366 documents published between 2014 and 2023. Records were exported from Scopus, converted to CSV format, and analyzed in Bibliometrix, with VOSviewer used to visualize co-authorship, co-citation, and keyword co-occurrence networks. Results show a sustained increase in Scopus-indexed publications over the decade, indicating expanding scholarly attention to local politics as a dynamic arena shaped by governance arrangements, participation, accountability, and actor–policy interactions. This study contributes a replicable workflow and a trend map that can guide researchers in positioning future studies and help practitioners identify evidence clusters and gaps. A key limitation is reliance on Scopus only, which may underrepresent non-indexed and regional scholarship.

Keywords: *Bibliometric* Analysis*, Local Politics, Decentralization, Political participation*

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Introduction

Local political research plays a strategic role in understanding the dynamics of democracy, governance, and power relations at the subnational level (Loughlin & Grimsditch, 2021). n a global context, local politics is an essential arena for the practice of genuine democracy, encompassing regional elections, community participation, and the implementation of public policies that directly impact citizens' lives (Kovács, 2024). At this level, interactions between local political actors, government institutions, and civil society shape the dynamics of power, which are often more complex and contextual than national politics. Local politics not only reflect the success or failure of democracy in procedural terms but also reveal the quality of representation, accountability, and responsiveness of the government to the community's needs (Rahman, 2023).

In the past decade, local politics has increasingly occupied a central position in global political science studies (Öniş & Yalikun, 2021). Decentralization, the strengthening of regional autonomy, and increased electoral competition at the subnational level have made local politics the primary arena where power relations, democratic practices, and the implementation of public policy are played out in concrete terms. However, despite a significant increase in academic attention to local politics, developments in its study tend to be fragmented and have not been systematically mapped out (Ricart-huguet & Sellars, 2022). Various local political studies raise critical issues, including clientelism, political dynasties, regional-level corruption, weak accountability, and the paradox of citizen political participation (Ricart-huguet & Sellars, 2022). However, the accumulated knowledge from these studies is often isolated—bound to a particular country, methodology, or theoretical approach—making it difficult to gain a comprehensive understanding of the direction of development and scientific contributions in this field. This condition creates an epistemic problem, namely an unclear map of knowledge regarding what is known, who the dominant academic actors are, and what issues are marginalized in local political studies (Lestari & Kurniawan, 2025).

The absence of comprehensive mapping also implies a lack of critical reflection on geographical and institutional biases in the production of local political knowledge. Certain countries and institutions still dominate global literature, while local political experiences in the Global South are often represented in a limited manner or merely as peripheral case studies. As a result, local political discourse risks reproducing knowledge inequalities and obscuring the complexity of local political practices (Paternotte & Verloo, 2021). Local political studies not only face the problem of limited empirical representation but also epistemological issues that have the potential to narrow the understanding of the diversity of local political practices influenced by different historical, social, and cultural contexts (Reed & Rudman, 2023). Bibliometric analysis becomes a strategic and critical approach. Unlike conventional narrative literature reviews, bibliometric analysis enables quantitative evaluation of the structure of scientific knowledge, including citation patterns, collaboration networks, thematic dominance, and the dynamics of concept evolution in local political research (Susanto et al., 2024). This approach not only maps the growth of publications but also opens up space for criticism of power relations in the production and distribution of scientific knowledge.

Unlike research conducted by (Galès, 2021) local politics is increasingly focused on policies, governance, and political choices worldwide. This study focuses on mapping and conducting a bibliometric analysis of the development of local politics research on a global scale over the past decade. Through this approach, the study seeks to identify publication trends,

dominant themes, collaboration networks between researchers, as well as the most influential countries and institutions in this field. In addition, this study also examines thematic and geographical gaps in the local politics literature, aiming to provide a comprehensive picture of the direction and dynamics of regional politics studies at the international level.

Although literature on local politics has grown rapidly over the past decade, existing studies still leave several significant research gaps. Most studies of regional politics are contextual and case-specific, focusing on particular countries or regions, and thus do not provide a comprehensive picture of the global patterns of development in local political studies. As a result, the understanding of the evolution of themes, theoretical approaches, and research methodologies in local politics across countries remains limited. Previous studies have mainly used narrative or systematic literature reviews, which, although conceptually rich, tend to rely on the researcher's subjective selection and are unable to capture the structure of scientific knowledge quantitatively. To date, global-scale bibliometric analyses that specifically map local political research over extended periods are still relatively rare and have not yet become mainstream in political studies.

The period from 2014 to 2023 was chosen as the study period because it represents a significant and recent phase in the development of local politics research at the global level. Since around 2014, academic attention to local politics has increased in line with the strengthening of decentralization, the expansion of electoral democracy at the subnational level, and an increase in studies on local governance, political participation, and power relations between central and regional governments in various countries. This time frame is also marked by significant thematic and methodological shifts, including increased studies on clientelism, political dynasties, local corruption, and the role of non-state actors, supported by the availability of data and cross-national academic collaboration. The ten-year period enables bibliometric analysis to capture relatively stable and comparative trends while remaining focused on contemporary dynamics. 2023 was set as the cut-off point because it was the last year of publication for which data were relatively complete at the time of data collection.

This article offers novelty in several key aspects. First, this study presents a comprehensive global bibliometric analysis of local politics research over the past ten years, thereby going beyond the case study or limited literature review approaches that have dominated previous research. Second, this study integrates quantitative bibliometric analysis with a critical reading of local political substance, not only mapping publication and citation trends, but also linking them to critical issues that are the primary focus of local political studies. This approach allows for the identification of relationships between the dynamics of knowledge production and substantive problems in local political practice. Third, this article explicitly reveals patterns of dominance and geographical inequality in global local political literature, highlighting the position of countries, institutions, and authors from the Global South in international academic networks. Thus, this study contributes to an epistemological critique of the architecture of knowledge in political studies. Fourth, the results of this study provide a research map and future research agenda based on empirical data, identifying thematic and methodological gaps that have not been widely explored. This contribution is expected to serve as a strategic reference for future researchers in developing more inclusive, critical, and globally balanced local political studies.

This study aims to situate local politics within a global context by mapping trends in local political research from 2014 to 2023 through a cross-country bibliometric analysis approach. This study explicitly identifies patterns of publication growth, geographical distribution, and citation

dynamics in the international literature, while analyzing patterns of scientific collaboration between authors, institutions, and countries to reveal the structure of academic networks and inequalities in knowledge production. In addition, this study focuses on identifying dominant themes and the evolution of research topics that shape the direction of global local politics studies, thereby enabling the disclosure of research gaps that arise due to the fragmentation of studies, geographical bias, and limitations of previous approaches. Thus, this study contributes to enhancing international understanding of the dynamics, trends, and challenges in local politics research, providing an empirical basis for the development of a more comparative, inclusive, and balanced local politics research agenda in the future.

Method

This study uses a qualitative method with a literature study approach, focusing on bibliometric studies. Bibliometric studies are an approach to highlight critical insights generated from scientific literature supplied annually by researchers from various countries around the world (Widi Izzara et al., 2024). This approach involves the use of bibliographic data, such as citations, number of publications, and journals published, to identify trends, patterns, and structures in academic knowledge production (Anto et al., 2025). The goal of bibliometric research is to advance and chart a specific field (Zakiyyah et al., 2022). Other benefits of bibliometric studies include exposing a discipline's most popular study subjects and highlighting knowledge gaps that need more research (Destari & Hidayat, 2024). In conducting the research analysis, the author used the Vosviewer application to assist in analyzing and visualizing the research data.

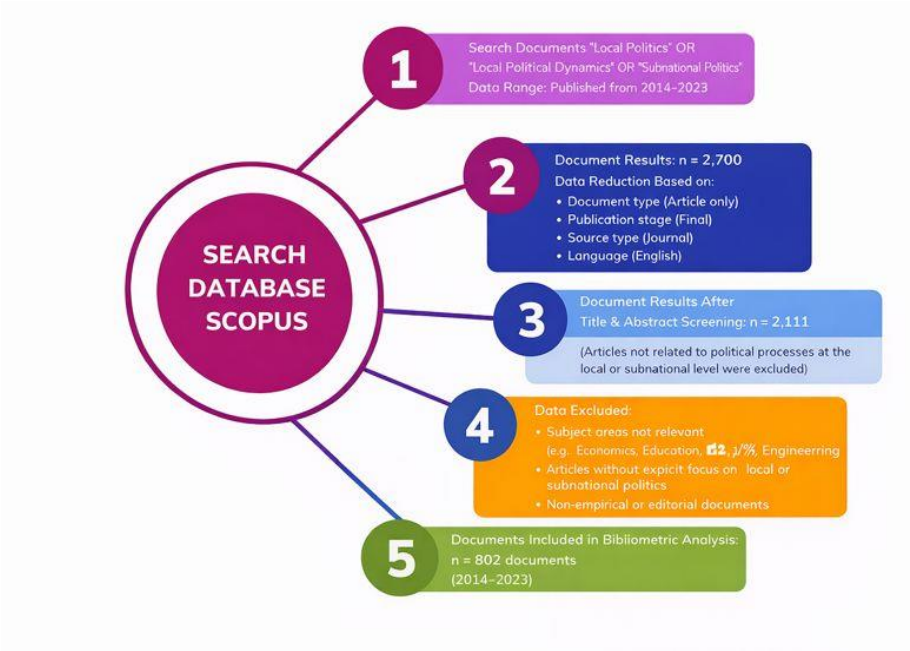


Figure 1. The PRISMA flow diagram is used to identify, screen and include papers for our bibliometric review

Source: Processed by Author, 2025

Articles from journals included in the Scopus database published within the last ten years, from 2014 to 2023, comprise the data used in this study. The Scopus Database is one of the two most significant databases and includes excellent journal-published articles, making it a viable option for data sources. The author used the following formula to narrow the data for this investigation, producing 1,366 articles out of 20,291 scientific publications with keywords. "Local

politics," The Scopus database searched for a data reduction formula: (TITLE-ABS-KEY (local AND politics) AND PUBYEAR > 2013 AND PUBYEAR < 2024 AND (LIMIT-TO (SRCTYPE , "j")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , "English")) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBSTAGE , "final" AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "Politics ") . So, a total of 802 articles were included in the analysis and visualized. Figure 1 shows the stages of the research.

Result and Discussion

General Information and Annual Publication Output

The number of publications annually for the first 1,366 publications from 2014 to 2023 is displayed in Figure 2. In recent years, the number of publications has continued to rise sharply. This demonstrates how the topic of local politics is becoming more and more relevant. An illustration of the evolution of local politics studies during the past ten years may be found below.

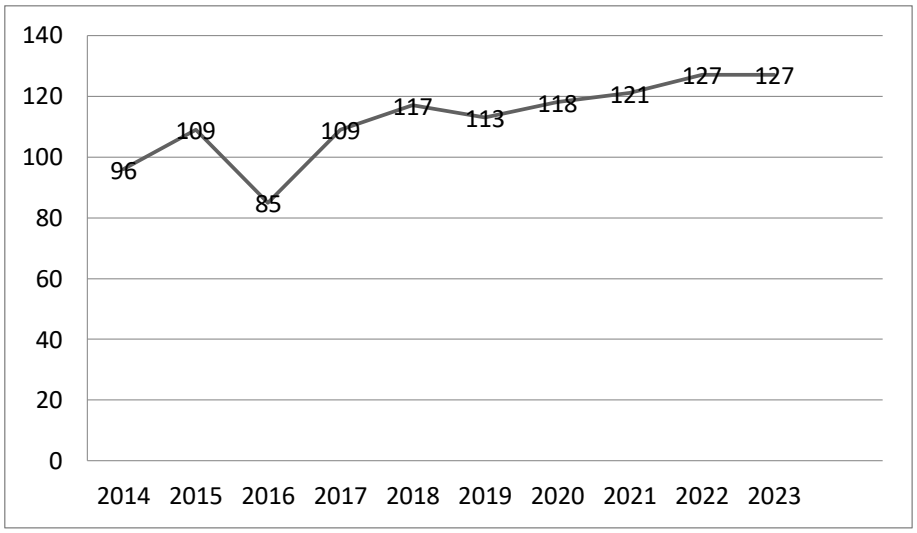


Figure 2. Publication by Year

Source: processed by author, 2025

The figure above shows the trend in the number of local political research publications during the 2014–2023 period, which generally experienced an increase with limited fluctuations, reflecting the dynamics of increasingly strong research development. After increasing from 96 articles in 2014 to 109 articles in 2015, the number of publications experienced a significant decline in 2016, before recovering and showing a relatively stable upward trend since 2017. Since then, local political research publications have increased gradually, reaching their highest point in 2022 and 2023, with 127 articles each. This pattern can be interpreted as the impact of the strengthening of the global decentralization agenda and regional autonomy in various countries, which has encouraged increased academic attention to political dynamics at the subnational level. Critically, the stability and growth of publications in the latter half of the decade also indicate a process of consolidation in the field of local politics studies. However, fluctuations at the beginning of the period show that knowledge production remains influenced by the global political and institutional context. Thus, this trend not only reflects an increase in the quantity of research but also confirms the increasingly strategic nature of local politics as a locus of analysis in the study of democracy and global governance. shows that 2023 is a year in which scholars conduct much

research on local politics and local government (Barari & Simko, 2023) , (de Benedictis-Kessner et al., 2023). In addition, several countries have responded to local politics.

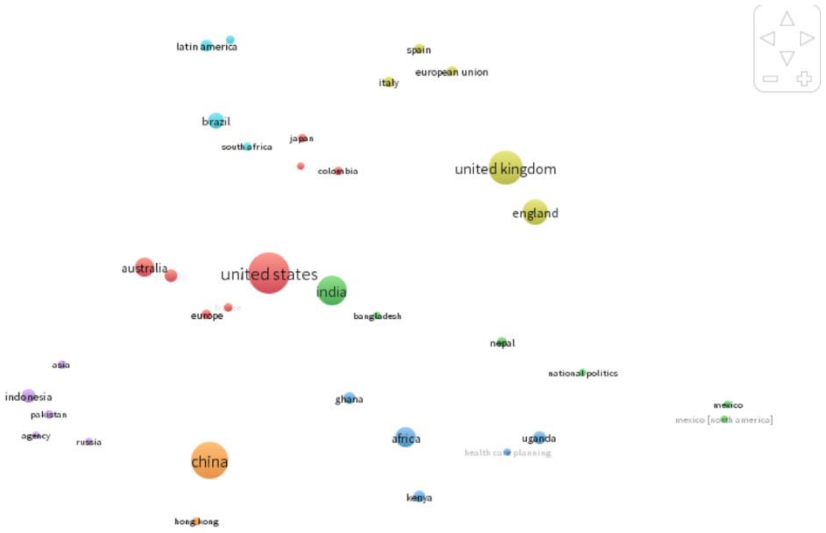


Figure 3. Publication by country

Source: Processed by author, 2025

Figure 3 illustrates a highly unequal global collaboration landscape in local political research. The United States sits at the core of the network, functioning as the main hub of international cooperation and knowledge diffusion. Its large node size and central position imply not only high research output, but also strong connectivity that allows it to shape dominant themes, methods, and publication pathways. The United Kingdom and China appear as secondary centers (Clarke & Cochrane, 2013; Li, 2010; Rhodes, 1987; Varney, 2013; Yeh et al., 2013). The UK's position is consistent with its long-standing role in political science publishing and its dense links with US- and Europe-based institutions, while China's prominence signals a more recent but rapidly expanding research capacity and international engagement.

In contrast, many Global South countries (Indonesia, Nepal, Uganda, Ghana, Bangladesh) appear at the network's periphery (Hanif & Pratikno, 2017; Le Galès, 2021; Priyambudi Sulistiyanto, 2020; Sundaram, 1998). Their smaller nodes indicate lower publication volume and weaker integration into cross-border co-authorship ties. Being peripheral in a bibliometric network is not simply a matter of "producing less." It often reflects structural barriers: limited access to high-impact journals, uneven research funding, language and editorial gatekeeping, restricted mobility and international partnerships, and the tendency for global collaborations to be mediated through core countries. As a consequence, empirical realities from developing contexts may enter the literature in fragmented ways, remain local in circulation, or be interpreted through external analytical frames rather than developing into globally referenced theoretical contributions.

This pattern highlights a substantive research gap, geographical and structural inequalities in the production and circulation of local political knowledge. Local politics in developing countries is rich in variation (informal governance, decentralization dynamics, patronage networks, identity politics, and hybrid institutions), yet these experiences are often underrepresented in the "core" international conversation or are treated primarily as case studies rather than as sources of conceptual innovation. The network structure therefore suggests a skewed global canon, where

agenda-setting and theory-building are concentrated among a small set of academically powerful countries, while many contexts that could challenge, refine, or extend existing theories remain weakly visible.

Against this backdrop, the novelty of the present study lies in its use of cross-country bibliometric analysis to empirically demonstrate how dominance, inequality, and collaboration are patterned at a global scale in local political research. Rather than assuming imbalance, the study maps it: who occupies the center, who is peripheral, and how collaboration ties are distributed. This contributes analytically by providing evidence for debates on knowledge hierarchies and epistemic inequality, and it contributes practically by offering a baseline for designing a more inclusive research agenda. Such an agenda would encourage stronger South–South collaboration, greater integration of underrepresented cases into comparative frameworks, and research partnerships that do not merely extract data from peripheral contexts but also strengthen their role in theory development and international publication networks.

Overall, Figure 3 is not just a descriptive visualization, it functions as an empirical argument that the global field of local political research remains uneven and structurally stratified. By demonstrating these patterns, this study provides a foundation for rethinking how local political knowledge is produced, with whom it is produced, and whose local experiences ultimately shape the global understanding of politics.

Networks, Development Trends, and Research Density

This study undertakes a systematic mapping of the keyword co occurrence network and the thematic density of scientific publications on local politics published between 2014 and 2023. By applying bibliometric techniques to the selected corpus, the study delineates the relational architecture among keywords and identifies clusters of terms that are consistently associated with regional and subnational political issues. These clusters are interpreted as thematic groupings that reflect how particular concepts are repeatedly mobilized together in scholarly communication, thereby indicating the formation of coherent and mutually reinforcing lines of research within the field.

More broadly, this form of bibliometric mapping enables the identification of recurring thematic cores that constitute the dominant intellectual foundations of local political research, while also detecting emerging lines of inquiry that signal shifts in scholarly priorities over time. Equally important, the analysis highlights topic areas that remain comparatively underexplored, which can be interpreted as conceptual or empirical gaps that merit further scholarly attention. In this sense, the study does not merely describe the distribution of topics, but also offers an evidence based basis for assessing the maturity, consolidation, and diversification of research agendas in local political studies.

Within this analytical framework, keyword network analysis provides an interpretable representation of the intellectual structure of the field by systematically revealing conceptual linkages among topics as reflected in their patterns of joint occurrence across publications. The co occurrence relationships are treated as indicators of thematic proximity, allowing the study to infer how scholars position and connect concepts within the broader discourse. Furthermore, the results support the identification of prospective research directions by clarifying the conceptual relationships among key themes, including democratization, citizen and community participation, governance, and local power dynamics, as they are articulated within the existing body of

scientific literature. By foregrounding these relational patterns, the study contributes to a more structured understanding of how knowledge on local politics has evolved over the last decade and offers a grounded platform for guiding future investigations.

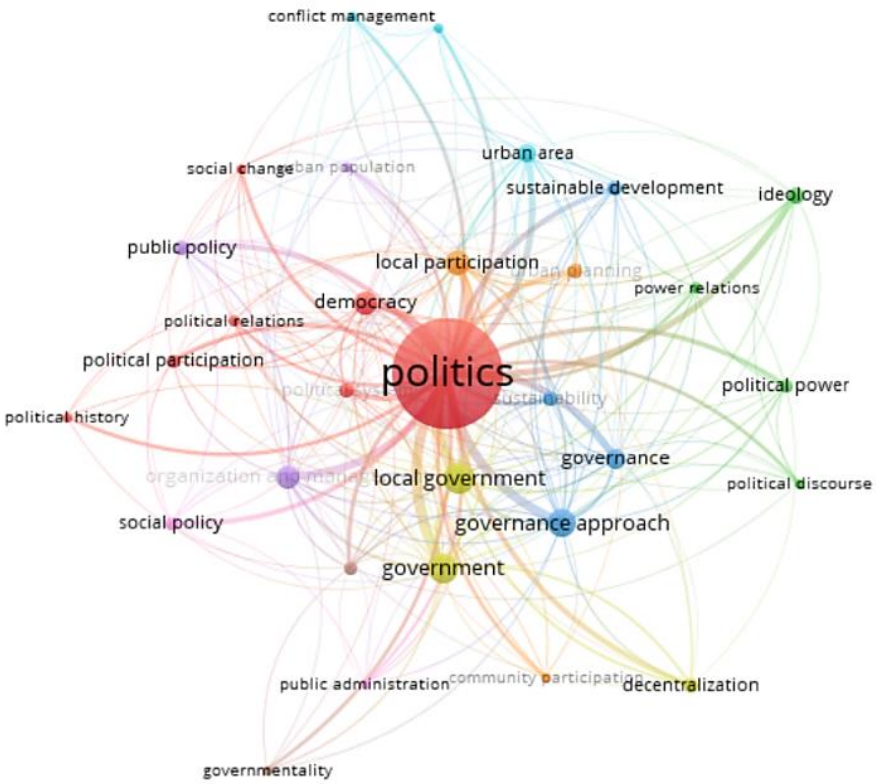


Figure 4. Local political issues
Source: processed by author, 2025

Figure 4 illustrates a map of keyword co-occurrence in local political research, displaying the thematic structure and conceptual links in the global literature. The keyword "politics" occupies the most central and dominant position, functioning as the main node connecting various thematic clusters. Surrounding it are clusters related to democracy, political participation, public policy, and political relations, indicating that local political studies remain heavily focused on the normative and procedural dimensions of democracy (Aminu et al., 2012; De Vito & Gómez, 2020; Booher, 2004; Hankinson et al., 2024; Lang, 2004). Other prominent clusters include themes such as governance, local government, decentralization, and public administration, indicating a strong focus on governance and local institutions as the primary objects of analysis. In addition, more specific thematic clusters have emerged, such as power relations, ideology, and political discourse, as well as contemporary issues like sustainable development, urban areas, and conflict management, indicating an expansion of the local political research agenda towards cross-sectoral and multidisciplinary issues. However, the uneven connectivity between clusters shows thematic fragmentation, where some problems develop in parallel without strong conceptual integration. This condition reveals a research gap, namely the lack of a comprehensive theoretical synthesis between the approaches of democracy, governance, and power relations in global-local political

studies. In this context, the novelty of this study lies in its ability to use bibliometric analysis to systematically map thematic structures, identify dominance and disconnections between topics, and offer an empirical basis for the development of a more integrated, critical, and reflective local political research agenda that addresses the complexity of political practices at the local level.

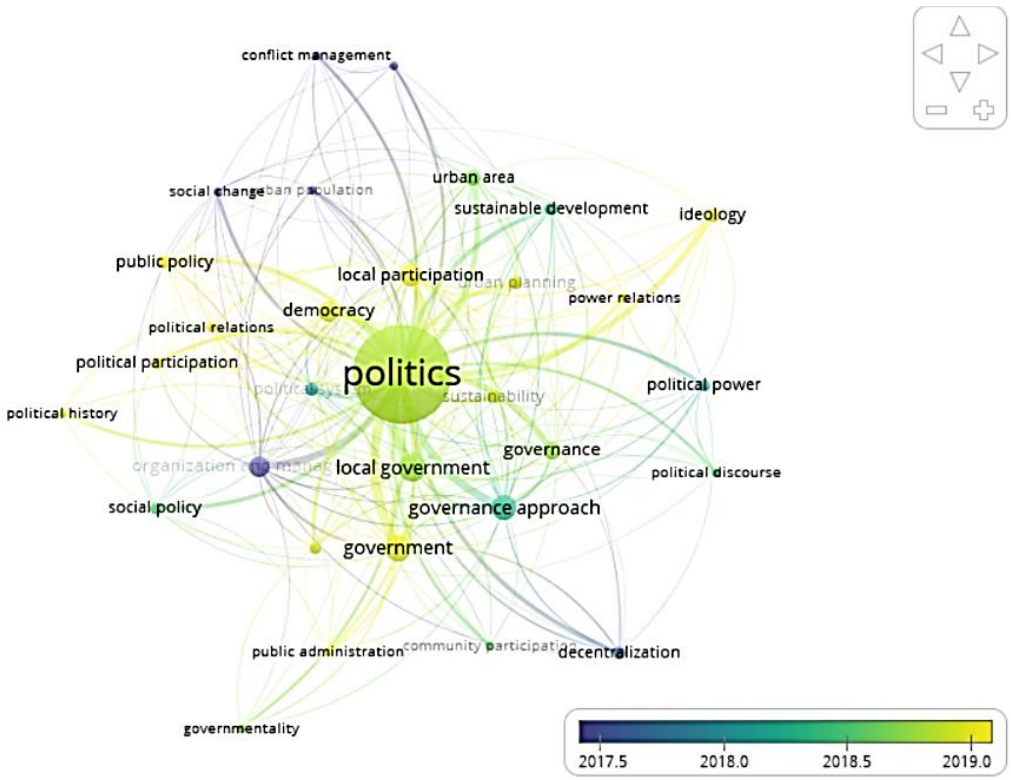


Figure 5. Portrait of Local Political Development

Source: processed by author, 2025

Figure 5 presents a keyword co occurrence overlay map that illustrates the temporal dynamics of thematic development in local political research. In this visualization, node size indicates the frequency with which a keyword appears in the dataset, thereby signalling the relative prominence of particular concepts within the literature. In parallel, the color gradation from blue to green to yellow represents the average year of keyword occurrence, which enables a systematic distinction between earlier and more recent thematic emphases. As depicted in the map, the keyword politics occupies the most central position and exhibits extensive connectivity with a wide range of other terms, underscoring its function as an overarching concept that integrates diverse strands of inquiry in local political studies. Keywords displayed in darker hues, particularly those in the blue to green spectrum, including public policy, political history, conflict management, and social policy, correspond to the earlier phase of scholarly attention. This early thematic orientation is largely characterized by a normative and institutionally focused analytical lens, in which research tends to prioritize formal governance arrangements, policy frameworks, and state centric approaches to understanding local political processes.

Meanwhile, keywords in lighter colors (green-yellow), such as governance, local government, decentralization, local participation, power relations, political discourse, and sustainable development, indicate a shift in the research agenda towards more contemporary, contextual, and cross-sectoral issues. This overlay pattern indicates a thematic transition in local political research, from studies oriented towards institutions and policies to a more critical

approach to power relations, community participation, and the link between local politics and the sustainable development agenda. However, the lack of full integration between clusters also highlights a research gap, specifically the limited theoretical synthesis that links the dynamics of democracy, governance, and power relations within a single analytical framework. In this context, the novelty of this study lies in its ability to utilize time-based bibliometric analysis to reveal the evolution of themes, identify shifts in research focus, and provide an empirical basis for developing a more integrative local political research agenda relevant to contemporary global challenges.

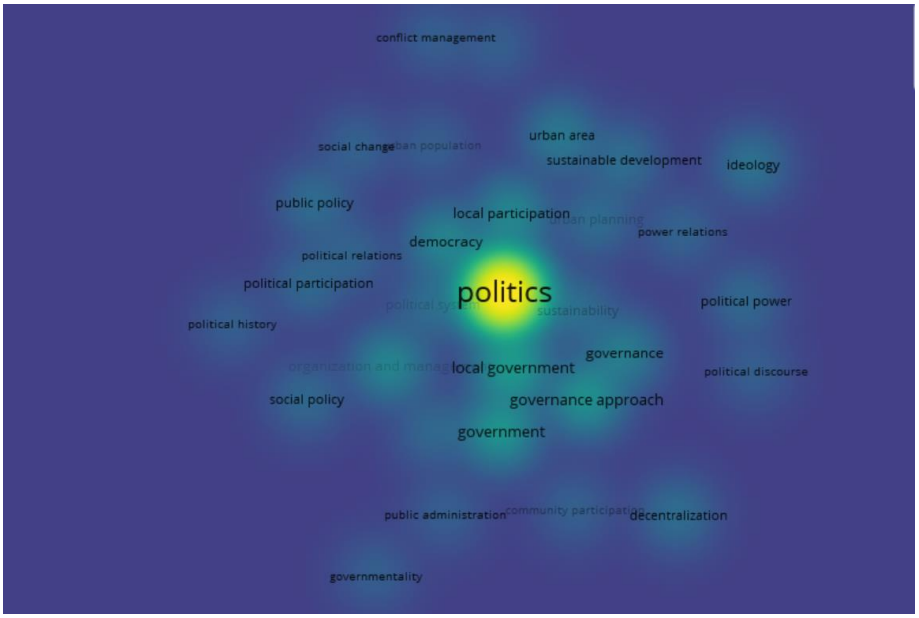


Figure 6. Research Agenda and Future Research on Local Politics

Source: processed by author, 2025

Figure 6 presents a density visualization of local political research topics derived from keyword data processed using VOSviewer. This map depicts the concentration and relative intensity of dominant themes in the global literature by translating patterns of keyword occurrence into spatial and color based density gradients. In this representation, the bright yellow region located at the center of the map signifies the area of highest thematic density, indicating a very high frequency of keyword occurrence as well as strong topical relevance within the corpus of publications analyzed. By contrast, areas shaded from green to dark blue denote themes with progressively lower intensity, suggesting less frequent usage and comparatively peripheral positioning in the broader research landscape.

Notably, the keyword politics occupies the central position and exhibits the highest density score, thereby confirming its role as a core and integrative concept that anchors multiple discourses within local political studies. In close proximity to this central node, keywords such as democracy, local government, governance, governance approach, and government form cluster within relatively high density zones. This pattern indicates that the international scholarship on local politics is strongly oriented toward questions of governance arrangements, institutional design and performance, and the functioning of democratic practices at the subnational level. Taken together, these high density thematic concentrations reflect the mainstream trajectory of the literature, which conceptualizes local politics as a critical arena for examining the practical

operation of democracy and the dynamics of governance across local and regional governmental structures.

Meanwhile, several other keywords, including political participation, public policy, decentralization, power relations, political discourse, sustainable development, and urban areas, are situated within zones of medium density. This placement suggests that these issues constitute substantive and recurring agendas in the literature, yet they have not consolidated into the primary thematic core that dominates scholarly attention. In other words, although these topics are evidently recognized as relevant to the study of local politics, their relative intensity indicates that they remain secondary strands of inquiry rather than serving as the central analytical lens through which the field is most commonly approached.

In contrast, themes such as governmentality, conflict management, ideology, and social change appear in low density regions of the map. Their peripheral positioning indicates limited academic engagement and, more specifically, points to the comparatively marginal role of critical frameworks and alternative perspectives in the global study of local politics. This pattern is analytically significant because it signals an imbalance in the intellectual structure of the field, where institutional and governance oriented approaches remain strongly dominant and are not yet sufficiently complemented by sustained inquiry into power relations, discursive contestation, ideological formation, and broader processes of social transformation.

From a critical standpoint, the density visualization therefore reveals a thematic gap in the international literature on local politics, namely the continued predominance of formal institutional and governance perspectives that has not been fully counterbalanced by deeper exploration of the political and social dynamics through which local power is produced, negotiated, and contested. Within this context, the novelty of the present study lies in its capacity to employ bibliometric analysis not merely as a descriptive tool for identifying dominant themes, but also as an analytical instrument for detecting low density areas as strategic opportunities for advancing a more diverse, critical, and reflexive research agenda. By foregrounding these underrepresented themes, the study contributes to the development of future inquiries that are better equipped to capture the complexity of political practices at the regional level and to broaden the conceptual and methodological horizons of local political research.

Conclusion

The conclusion of this study shows that publications indexed by Scopus in the 2014–2023 period have increased yearly. This increase indicates that local political studies are gaining greater attention from academics and researchers in various countries. It also reflects the expansion of studied issues, ranging from democratization, governance, and community participation to the influence of digital technology in local political dynamics. Thus, this upward trend in publications confirms the relevance of regional politics in the global context and opens up opportunities for more innovative and comprehensive research in the future. This illustrates that academics and researchers are interested in discussing this research topic. Furthermore, in this study, the United States was recorded as the most significant contributor, providing 370 documents that explored local political studies from various perspectives, including regional development strategies, public policy dynamics, the role of political actors, and the influence of globalization and technology on local governance.

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