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The Global Evolution of Political Polarization Research: A Bibliometric and Science-Mapping Analysis

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Abstract

Context: Political polarization has evolved from a predominantly ideological and partisan concern into a multidimensional phenomenon encompassing affective divisions, social identity, digital communication, misinformation, and governance. Despite rapid growth in this literature, its long-term intellectual and thematic development remains insufficiently mapped.

Aim: This study examines the global evolution of political polarization research from 1974 to 2026, identifying its publication patterns, influential contributors, collaboration networks, intellectual structure, thematic development, and emerging research directions.

Approach: A bibliometric analysis was conducted using 1,615 Scopus-indexed articles and reviews retrieved on 24 July 2026. Bibliometrix (Biblioshiny) and VOSviewer were employed for performance analysis and science mapping, including publication and citation analysis, country collaboration and citation networks, keyword co-occurrence, thematic mapping, multiple correspondence analysis, and thematic evolution.

Key Findings: Political polarization research expanded substantially after 2020, with an annual growth rate of 10.48%. The United States dominated publication output and total citations, while international collaboration became increasingly visible. The field evolved from ideological and partisan polarization toward affective polarization, social media, misinformation, political communication, governance, and artificial intelligence. Conceptual mapping indicates an increasingly cohesive and interdisciplinary knowledge structure.

Interpretation: The findings demonstrate that political polarization has developed into an interdisciplinary research domain connecting political, psychological, communicative, social, and technological perspectives.

Contribution: This study provides a longitudinal mapping of nearly five decades of political polarization scholarship by integrating performance analysis and science mapping, while identifying emerging priorities for comparative, interdisciplinary, and policy-relevant research.

Keywords: political polarization; affective polarization; bibliometric analysis; political communication; social media; artificial intelligence

1. Introduction

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Political polarization has become one of the most serious social and political challenges facing contemporary democracies. While disagreement is a fundamental aspect of democratic processes, the growing polarization in ideologies, emotions, and identities has turned political competition into a phenomenon that has spread throughout society, impacting public trust, democratic governance, social cohesion, and institutional legitimacy. Recent scholarship frames political polarization as a multifaceted phenomenon that goes beyond policy disagreement to include emotional, psychological, communicative, and technological dimensions, arising from the interplay between political actors, media systems, social identities, and digital information environments (Erdogan et al., 2026; van Baar & FeldmanHall, 2022).

Digital communication, algorithmic recommendation systems, and artificial intelligence have transformed political communication and public discourse, creating new challenges for democratic governance, institutional trust and social policy (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021; Kumar & Sahu, 2026; Wang et al., 2026). Reflecting these changes, research on political polarization has grown significantly and spread across political science, sociology, communication, psychology, information science, and computational social science. In recent years, various aspects of polarization have been studied, including affective polarization, political participation, social media, polarization and misinformation, political communication, governance, and digital activism (Lubej et al., 2026; Moolathingal & Namrata, 2025; Németh, 2023; Obreja, 2023). As these divisions have become more heterogeneous, contemporary political polarization is increasingly viewed as the result of institutional, legal, communicative, and social processes that shape collective identities and governance within societies (Basu, 2026; Erdogan et al., 2026; van Baar & FeldmanHall, 2022).

However, the long-term evolution of polarization research, including its intellectual structure, collaboration patterns, thematic development, and emerging directions, remains poorly understood and has not been examined in a single comprehensive analysis.

Accordingly, this study addresses the following research objectives:
RO1: To examine the publication growth and overall performance of political polarization research.
RO2: To identify the most influential journals, authors, countries, and publications contributing to the field.
RO3: To explore the intellectual structure and collaboration patterns of political polarization research.
RO4: To analyze the conceptual structure, thematic evolution, and emerging research trends.
RO5: To identify future research directions based on bibliometric performance and science mapping analyses.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Concept of Political Polarization

While political polarization has emerged as one of the most salient features of modern democratic societies, its conceptualization varies across political science, sociological, psychological, and communication studies. Early scholarship tended to define polarization as the growing ideological gap between people, political parties, or social groups, with opinions clustering around the extremes of the spectrum, or further away from the political center (Fiorina & Abrams, 2008). Later research contends that polarization is not a single, uniform process but a plurality of social and political divisions with distinct mechanisms and outcomes. Bramson et al. (2016) show that polarization has multiple conceptions: divergence, group consensus, fragmentation and size parity, thus requiring conceptual precision in its measurement and interpretation.

Modern studies have therefore moved beyond a purely ideological understanding of polarization. According to Erdogan et al. (2026), polarization is not merely an opposition to public policies, but a multidimensional process that can be explained in ideological, affective, identity-

based, digital, and cross-national aspects. This broader view recognizes that political conflict is a product not only of ideology but also of emotion, social identity, communication, and technological change.

In this multidimensional context, two types of polarization are commonly distinguished: ideological and affective polarization. While ideological polarization suggests that opinions on policy matters become more distant between the extremes of the ideological spectrum, affective polarization is defined by the growing emotional distance between political groups, that is, stronger attachment to one's own group and growing dislike, distrust, or hostility toward the other group (Hajnal, 2026; Lubej et al., 2026; Wagner, 2024). In contrast to ideological polarization, affective polarization is grounded in social identity and intergroup emotions, making political disagreement more personal and socially entrenched. New findings also indicate that affective polarization is not limited to two-party systems but is also growing in multiparty democracies and diverse political environments, making it a worldwide phenomenon.

Recent interdisciplinary scholarship also highlights how psychological, social, institutional, and technological factors interact to produce polarization. These political divisions are reinforced by cognitive biases, social identities, partisan media, social media platforms, and algorithmic information environments (Marino & Iannelli, 2023; van Baar & FeldmanHall, 2022; Wilson et al., 2020). These processes exacerbate political polarization and affect public perceptions, democratic participation, and social integration, making political polarization a political and social issue with significant impacts on democratic governance and social policy.

2.2 Evolution of Political Polarization Research

Research on political polarization has evolved from a predominantly institutional and ideological focus toward a more interdisciplinary perspective encompassing identity, emotions, communication, technology, and governance. Earlier research primarily examined polarization through party competition, ideological distance, and legislative behavior. For example, Lu et al. (2019) traced long-term changes in polarization in the United States Congress, identifying a decline from the 1960s to the late 1980s followed by an increase in subsequent decades.

Subsequent research increasingly expanded from elite and ideological polarization to mass and affective polarization. Scholars began examining how partisan identities shape emotional attachment to political in-groups and negative attitudes toward political out-groups, extending the study of polarization beyond policy and ideological disagreement to its social and psychological dimensions. Recent systematic evidence also indicates that affective polarization is associated with political participation, although these relationships vary across institutional and non-institutional forms of participation and political contexts (Lubej et al., 2026). This expansion has also encouraged greater attention to multiparty systems and contexts outside the United States.

Changes in the media environment have further broadened the field, with increasing attention to partisan selective exposure, fragmented audiences, echo chambers, and misinformation. Bou-Hamad and Yehya (2020), for example, demonstrated partisan selective exposure in television consumption in Lebanon, illustrating the relevance of these processes beyond Western democratic contexts. Similarly, Kubin and von Sikorski's (2021) systematic review of 94 studies found that exposure to attitude-consistent media was generally associated with increased political polarization, while also identifying a substantial concentration of research using U.S. samples and Twitter-based data.

More recently, political polarization has been examined as a complex sociotechnical and systems-level phenomenon. Levin et al. (2021) emphasize interactions across individual, institutional, and societal levels, while Wang et al. (2026) identify information environments, individual characteristics, and social contexts as interconnected factors in social-media polarization. Emerging research has also extended to artificial intelligence, deepfakes, and polarized information environments, as well as to low- and middle-income countries, where the

roles of media environments, echo chambers, and political actors remain important areas for further investigation (Larreguy & Tiburcio, 2026).

2.3 Bibliometric Studies on Political Polarization

Bibliometric analysis has become an increasingly important method for examining the development, intellectual structure and thematic evolution of research fields characterized by rapid publication growth and disciplinary fragmentation. Recent applications across political science, governance, communication and digital society demonstrate the value of integrating citation analysis, keyword co-occurrence, thematic mapping and longitudinal visualization to understand how complex research domains evolve (Ahmi et al., 2026; Danaeefard et al., 2025; Maulana et al., 2025; Zhu & Cheng, 2025).

Studies directly addressing political polarization through bibliometric or structured mapping approaches remain comparatively limited. Moolathingal and Namrata (2025) analyzed 80 publications on affective polarization in Asia and identified rapid growth after 2018, a strong concentration in China and South Korea, and increasing attention to social media, political communication and social fragmentation. Their findings also revealed substantial regional underrepresentation, particularly in India and Central Asia. Németh (2023), using a scoping review of 154 natural-language-processing studies, found that computational polarization research was heavily concentrated in the United States, Twitter and machine-learning applications, with limited integration of domain theory and interdisciplinary explanation. These studies demonstrate both the expansion of specialized polarization research and the persistence of geographic, methodological and conceptual imbalances (Moolathingal & Namrata, 2025; Németh, 2023).

A broader body of bibliometric research has examined domains closely connected to political polarization. Obreja (2023) analyzed 3,389 Facebook- and Twitter-related publications and showed that political research on social media increasingly converged around disinformation, fake news, populism, elections, COVID-19 and political actors. Bibliometric studies of political communication similarly identify rapid growth in research on digital democracy, algorithms, misinformation, public opinion and platform-based political participation (Judijanto & Haryadi, 2025; Sinaga & Wulan, 2026). Studies of social media in election campaigns and political mobilization also report expanding attention to polarization, misinformation, digital campaigning and cross-national collaboration (Risca et al., 2025; Zubair, 2026).

Related bibliometric evidence further demonstrates that political polarization increasingly intersects with governance, democratic resilience, solidarity and algorithmic communication. Sari (2025) identified governance, social movements, deliberative democracy, conflict management and social media as major themes in scholarship on solidarity under political conflict. Ahmi et al. (2026) showed that governance research has shifted from foundational institutional concerns toward digital, sustainability, crisis-responsive and artificial-intelligence-related themes. In political advertising and marketing, recent bibliometric studies similarly reveal the growing importance of digital platforms, message framing, audience segmentation, algorithmic gatekeeping and artificial intelligence (Jain et al., 2026; Maulana et al., 2025).

2.4 Research Gap and Contribution of the Present Study

Recent review studies have significantly advanced conceptual understanding by distinguishing ideological, affective, identity-based, and digital dimensions of polarization while highlighting the growing influence of social media, algorithmic recommendation systems, misinformation, and artificial intelligence on political behavior and democratic processes (Erdogan et al., 2026; van Baar & FeldmanHall, 2022; Wang et al., 2026). Likewise, systematic reviews have synthesized evidence regarding the determinants and consequences of affective polarization, digital communication, and political participation, providing important theoretical and empirical insights into the social implications of increasing political divisions (Borger et al., 2026; Cole et al., 2025; Lubej et al., 2026).

Although these studies substantially improve understanding of political polarization, the available bibliometric evidence remains fragmented. Existing bibliometric investigations generally examine specific dimensions of the field, including affective polarization in Asia, natural language processing applications, political communication, social media, digital activism, misinformation, political marketing, or democratic solidarity, rather than the broader intellectual structure of political polarization research itself (Moolathingal & Namrata, 2025; Németh, 2023; Obreja, 2023; Sari, 2025; Subektie et al., 2025; Zubair, 2026). Moreover, several studies acknowledge persistent methodological and geographical limitations, including strong dependence on United States datasets, emphasis on Twitter-based analyses, concentration within particular disciplines, and limited integration across sociological, political, communication, and computational perspectives (Erdogan et al., 2026; Moolathingal & Namrata, 2025; Németh, 2023).

Another important limitation concerns the absence of an integrated longitudinal assessment of the field. Most existing studies focus on particular regions, methodological approaches, technologies, or thematic subfields without simultaneously examining publication growth, citation impact, collaboration networks, conceptual development, thematic evolution, and emerging research frontiers over an extended historical period. Consequently, there remains limited understanding of how political polarization research has evolved as an interconnected body of knowledge, how interdisciplinary collaboration has developed, and which themes are likely to shape future scholarship. This limitation is particularly important because political polarization increasingly influences social cohesion, democratic governance, institutional trust, digital communication, and public policy, requiring evidence that extends beyond disciplinary boundaries (Ali et al., 2026; Danaeefard et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2026).

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a bibliometric research design to systematically examine the intellectual structure, publication trends, collaboration patterns, and thematic development of political polarization research. Scopus was selected as the sole bibliographic database because it provides broad multidisciplinary coverage and structured bibliographic and citation metadata suitable for large-scale performance analysis and science mapping. Comparative assessments have shown that Scopus offers extensive journal coverage across scholarly disciplines, making it an established data source for bibliometric research (Falagas et al., 2008; Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016). The use of a single database also ensured consistency in document indexing, citation counts, author information, affiliations, and other metadata across the dataset. Scopus records can be exported in formats compatible with bibliometric tools, supporting the performance and science-mapping analyses undertaken in this study. Nevertheless, database coverage differs across indexing systems; therefore, reliance on Scopus alone may exclude relevant publications indexed elsewhere and is acknowledged as a limitation of the study (Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016).

3.2 Data Collection and Search Strategy

The search cut-off date was 24 July 2026. Publications indexed in 2026 were retained to capture the most recent developments and emerging thematic directions in political polarization research. However, because 2026 represents an incomplete publication year, its publication volume was not interpreted as directly comparable with that of complete calendar years. Accordingly, 2026 results are treated as partial-year observations and are interpreted primarily as indicators of recent research activity and thematic development rather than as evidence of full-year publication performance.

The search strategy was designed to capture publications explicitly addressing major dimensions of political polarization. Searches were conducted in article titles and keywords using the terms “political polarization,” “political polarisation,” “affective polarization,” “affective polarisation,” “issue polarization,” “issue polarisation,” “partisan polarization,” and “partisan

polarisation." Both American and British spelling variants were included to improve retrieval coverage. The results were subsequently restricted to the subject areas of Arts and Humanities, Social Sciences, Psychology, Economics, Business, Management and Accounting, Multidisciplinary, and Computer Science. Only English-language articles and reviews at the final publication stage were retained for analysis. The complete Scopus search string used for data retrieval is presented below.

(TITLE ("political polarization" OR "political polarisation" OR "affective polarization" OR "affective polarisation" OR "issue polarization" OR "issue polarisation" OR "partisan polarization" OR "partisan polarisation") OR KEY ("political polarization" OR "political polarisation" OR "affective polarization" OR "affective polarisation" OR "issue polarization" OR "issue polarisation" OR "partisan polarization" OR "partisan polarisation")) AND (LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "ARTS") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "SOCI") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "PSYC") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "ECON") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "BUSI") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "MULT") OR LIMIT-TO (SUBJAREA , "COMP")) AND (EXCLUDE (DOCTYPE , "dp") OR EXCLUDE (DOCTYPE , "le") OR EXCLUDE (DOCTYPE , "sh") OR EXCLUDE (DOCTYPE , "er") OR EXCLUDE (DOCTYPE , "no") OR EXCLUDE (DOCTYPE , "ed") OR EXCLUDE (DOCTYPE , "bk") OR EXCLUDE (DOCTYPE , "cp") OR EXCLUDE (DOCTYPE , "ch")) AND (LIMIT-TO (LANGUAGE , "English")) AND (LIMIT-TO (PUBSTAGE , "final"))

No arbitrary lower publication-year restriction was imposed during data retrieval. The year 1974 represents the earliest publication year identified in the final dataset under the predefined search strategy and eligibility criteria and was therefore adopted as the starting point of the analysis. Retaining the complete 1974–2026 coverage, rather than restricting the dataset to the most recent 10 or 15 years, was necessary to address the longitudinal objectives of the study and to trace changes in publication growth, intellectual structure, and thematic development across the full historical trajectory represented in the retrieved literature. This approach is consistent with the use of bibliometric analysis to examine the evolution of a research field over time (Donthu et al., 2021).

3.3 Study Selection

The initial Scopus search retrieved 2,408 records. Successive filtering by subject area, document type, language, and publication stage reduced the dataset to 1,621 records. These records were then manually screened to assess topical relevance and bibliographic completeness. Topical relevance was assessed primarily from publication titles; records whose titles indicated that the study was not directly related to political polarization were excluded. Records were also excluded when essential bibliographic metadata required for bibliometric analysis, particularly author information, were incomplete. This manual screening resulted in the exclusion of four records. A subsequent duplicate check identified and removed two duplicate records, yielding a final dataset of 1,615 publications for bibliometric analysis. The complete selection procedure is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. PRISMA-Based Study Selection Process for the Bibliometric Dataset

Step	Screening criterion	Included	Excluded	Records remaining (n)
1	Initial Scopus search conducted on 24 July 2026 using the predefined search string	2,408	–	2,408
2	Subject areas: Social Sciences, Arts &	2,301	107	2,301

	Humanities, Psychology, Computer Science, Economics, Business, Management & Accounting, and Multidisciplinary			
3	Document types: Articles and Reviews	1,874	427	1,874
4	English-language publications	1,762	112	1,762
5	Publication stage: Final publications only	1,621	141 (Articles in Press)	1,621
6	Manual screening for topical relevance and metadata completeness	1,617	4	1,617
7	Duplicate records removed	1,615	2	1,615

Note: The search was conducted on 24 July 2026. Therefore, publications indexed in 2026 represent a partial publication year and should be interpreted accordingly. During manual screening, records were excluded when their titles indicated that they were not directly relevant to political polarization or when essential bibliographic metadata required for bibliometric analysis, such as author information, were incomplete.

Source: Author’s compilation based on Scopus data.

Table 1 summarizes the screening process, which yielded a final dataset of 1,615 publications.

3.4 Bibliometric Analysis

The bibliometric performance and science-mapping analyses were performed using Bibliometrix (Biblioshiny) in R and VOSviewer (version 1.6.20). The scientific production analysis, Bradford's law, leading authors, productive countries, citation analysis, highly cited documents, trend topics, thematic mapping, the conceptual structure (MCA), and thematic evolution were analyzed using Bibliometrix. The keyword co-occurrence network and country citation network were built using VOSviewer.

3.5 Network Visualization Parameters

The keyword co-occurrence analysis used all keywords and the full counting method. A minimum occurrence threshold of 10 was applied, resulting in 136 keywords in the network. For the country citation analysis, a minimum threshold of 5 documents and 10 citations per country was applied, resulting in 43 countries in the network.

4. Results

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics of the Bibliometric Dataset

Main Information	Description	Results
Dataset characteristics	Timespan	1974–2026*
	Sources (Journals, Books, etc.)	685
	Documents	1,615
	Annual growth rate (%)	10.48
	Average document age (years)	4.19

	Average citations per document	31.75
	Total references	117,313
Document contents	Keywords Plus (ID)	1,514
	Author's Keywords (DE)	3,479
Authors	Total authors	3,224
	Authors of single-authored documents	441
Collaboration indicators	Single-authored documents	495
	Co-authors per document	2.49
	International co-authorship (%)	23.22
Document types	Articles	1,550
	Reviews	65

Source: Author’s analysis of Scopus data.

Table 2 summarizes the descriptive features of the dataset (1,615 publications in 685 sources, 1974–2026). The dataset shows an annual growth rate of 10.48% and an average of 31.75 citations per document, indicating substantial citation impact. The publications were written by 3,224 authors, with an average of 2.49 co-authors per publication, and 23.22% of publications involved international co-authorship, indicating a moderate level of international collaboration. Research articles (n = 1,550) make up most of the dataset, and reviews (n = 65) form a smaller portion. The 2026 data represent a partial publication year.

Table 3. Annual Scientific Production on Political Polarization (1974–2026)

Year	Publications	Year	Publications
1974	1	2000	0
1975	1	2001	0
1976	0	2002	1
1977	0	2003	1
1978	0	2004	1
1979	0	2005	3
1980	1	2006	3
1981	0	2007	4
1982	0	2008	12
1983	0	2009	1
1984	1	2010	6
1985	0	2011	8
1986	2	2012	14
1987	0	2013	19
1988	0	2014	18
1989	1	2015	14

1990	0	2016	28
1991	1	2017	37
1992	0	2018	51
1993	1	2019	60
1994	0	2020	88
1995	0	2021	141
1996	0	2022	178
1997	3	2023	187
1998	1	2024	251
1999	0	2025	298
		2026*	178

Note: 2026 represents publications indexed up to 24 July 2026 and therefore constitutes a partial publication year.
Source: Author's analysis of Scopus data.

Table 3 shows the annual scientific production concerning political polarization between 1974 and 2026. Only a few publications appeared each year, and research activity remained sporadic until 2007. Output rose gradually after 2008 and steadily from 2016 onward. The field grew rapidly after 2020, and the highest annual output among completed publication years was recorded in 2025 (298 publications). A further 178 publications had already been indexed for 2026 by the search cut-off date of 24 July 2026. Because this represents only a partial publication year, the 2026 count should not be directly compared with the annual totals of completed years. Nevertheless, these records were retained to capture the most recent research activity and emerging thematic directions in the field.

Table 4. Core Sources on Political Polarization Based on Bradford's Law

Rank	Source (Journal)	Publications	Cumulative Publications	Bradford Zone
1	Electoral Studies	30	30	Zone 1
2	Political Psychology	25	55	Zone 1
3	Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America	25	80	Zone 1
4	Political Behavior	24	104	Zone 1
5	Frontiers in Political Science	20	124	Zone 1
6	American Politics Research	19	143	Zone 1
7	European Journal of Political Research	17	160	Zone 1
8	New Media & Society	17	177	Zone 1
9	PNAS Nexus	17	194	Zone 1
10	British Journal of Political Science	16	210	Zone 1

Source: Author's analysis of Scopus data.
Table 4 lists the core sources identified by applying Bradford's Law. Electoral Studies was the most productive journal with 30 articles, followed by Political Psychology and the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America (PNAS) with 25 articles each.

Political Behavior published 24 articles and Frontiers in Political Science published 20. Most core sources are political science, political psychology, and interdisciplinary journals, indicating that research on political polarization is concentrated in leading journals in these fields, consistent with Bradford's Law of scattering.

Table 5. Most Relevant Authors in Political Polarization Research

Rank	Author	Articles	Fractionalized Articles
1	Druckman, J. N.	14	3.36
2	Kim, Y.	12	6.78
3	Rojas, H.	12	3.58
4	Lee, S.	10	3.83
5	Warner, B. R.	10	4.23
6	Harteveld, E.	9	4.92
7	Lelkes, Y.	9	4.98
8	Bäck, H.	8	2.5
9	Wagner, M.	8	4.45
10	Garzia, D.	7	2.48

Source: Author's analysis of Scopus data.

Table 5 presents the most productive authors in political polarization research by number of publications. Druckman was the most prolific author (14 articles), while Kim had the highest fractionalized count (6.78), illustrating the difference between total publication counts and fractionalized contributions in collaborative research. Thus, fractionalized productivity reveals aspects of each author's contribution that publication counts alone do not capture.

Table 6. Top Corresponding Author's Countries in Political Polarization Research

Rank	Country	Articles	Articles (%)	SCP	MCP	MCP (%)
1	United States	596	36.9	506	90	15.1
2	United Kingdom	74	4.6	48	26	35.1
3	Spain	65	4	53	12	18.5
4	Germany	59	3.7	41	18	30.5
5	Netherlands	43	2.7	16	27	62.8
6	South Korea	40	2.5	26	14	35
7	Canada	36	2.2	22	14	38.9
8	Sweden	27	1.7	17	10	37
9	Switzerland	27	1.7	17	10	37
10	Israel	25	1.5	12	13	52

Source: Author's analysis of Scopus data.

Table 6 shows the top 10 countries by number of articles. The United States leads with 596 articles (36.9%), followed by the United Kingdom (74), Spain (65), and Germany (59). International collaboration is represented by MCP (%). The Netherlands has the highest share of internationally co-authored publications (62.8%), whereas the United States has the lowest (15.1%), indicating a strong domestic focus. Israel (52.0%) and Canada (38.9%) also show high collaboration rates.

Thus, the United States leads in publication volume, while collaborative engagement is proportionally higher in several European and other countries.

Table 7. Most Cited Countries in Political Polarization Research

Rank	Country	Total Citations (TC)	Average Citations per Article
1	United States	24,977	41.9
2	United Kingdom	1,695	22.9
3	Canada	1,665	46.2
4	Germany	1,516	25.7
5	Netherlands	1,101	25.6
6	Italy	947	37.9
7	Spain	853	13.1
8	South Korea	779	19.5
9	Sweden	711	26.3
10	Israel	606	24.2

Source: Author's analysis of Scopus data.

The most cited countries in political polarization research are shown in Table 7. The United States recorded the highest total number of citations (24,977), followed by the United Kingdom (1,695) and Canada (1,665). In terms of average citations per article, Canada recorded the highest value (46.2), followed by the United States (41.9) and Italy (37.9). These findings indicate that the United States had the greatest overall citation volume in the dataset, whereas Canada had the highest average citation rate per article among the countries listed. These indicators describe patterns of citation impact within the analyzed dataset and should not be interpreted as evidence of the underlying causes of national differences in citation performance.

Table 8. Most Globally Cited Documents in Political Polarization Research

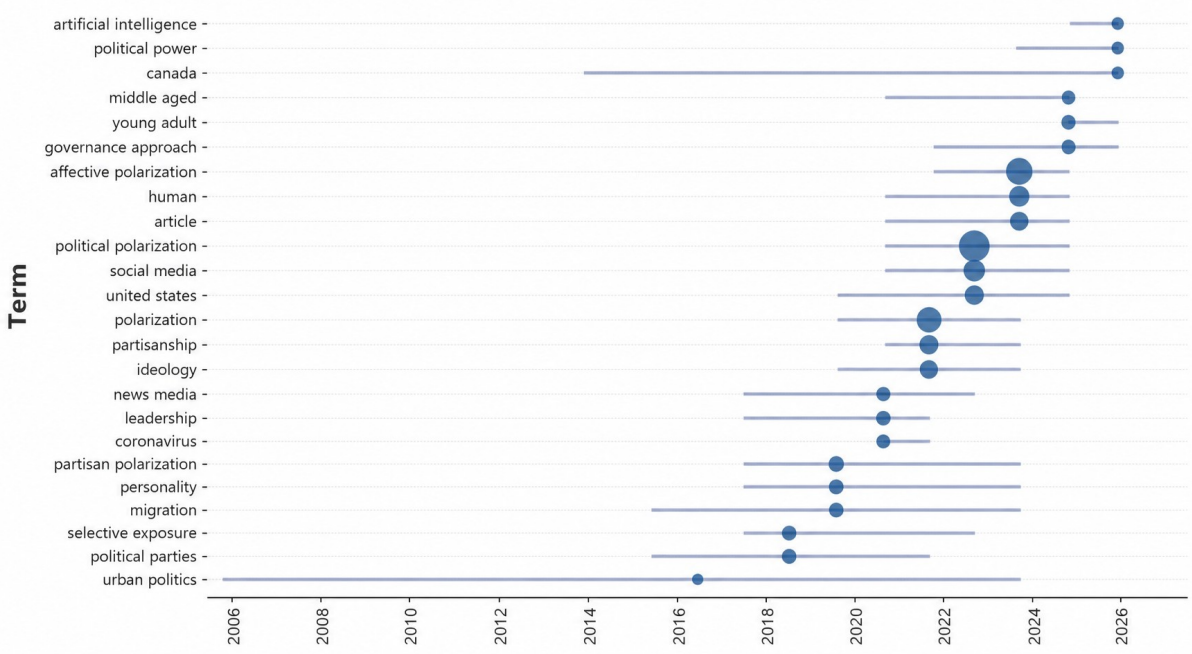
Rank	Document	DOI	Total Citations	Citations per Year	Normalized TC
1	Iyengar, S. et al. (2019), Annual Review of Political Science	10.1146/annurev-polisci-051117-073034	2,313	289.13	26.81
2	Bail, C. A. et al. (2018), Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America	10.1073/pnas.1804840115	1,380	153.33	16.73
3	Druckman, J. N. et al. (2013), American Political Science Review	10.1017/S0003055412000500	1,082	77.29	7.21
4	Fiorina, M. P. and Abrams, S. J. (2008), Annual Review of Political Science	10.1146/annurev.polisci.11.053106.153836	998	52.53	4.38
5	Mason, L. (2015), American Journal of Political Science	10.1111/ajps.12089	985	82.08	5.81

6	Prior, M. (2013), Annual Review of Political Science	10.1146/annurev-polisci-100711-135242	757	54.07	5.04
7	Baldassarri, D. and Gelman, A. (2008), American Journal of Sociology	10.1086/590649	709	37.32	3.11
8	Allcott, H. et al. (2020), Journal of Public Economics	10.1016/ j.jpubeco.2020.104254	634	90.57	9.59
9	Kubin, E. and von Sikorski, C. (2021), Annals of the International Communication Association	10.1080/23808985.2021.1976070	540	90	9.66
10	Autor, D. et al. (2020), American Economic Review	10.1257/aer.20170011	515	73.57	7.79

Source: Author's analysis of Scopus data.

Table 8 shows the top-cited publications in political polarization studies. The highest citation rate per year (289.13) and the highest normalized impact (26.81) were achieved by Iyengar et al. (2019), with 2,313 citations, followed by Bail et al. (2018) with 1,380 citations. Older studies had a significantly higher total number of citations, while the more recent studies by Allcott et al. (2020) and Kubin and von Sikorski (2021) showed comparatively high normalized citation scores, indicating strong impact relative to their publication date.

Figure 1. Trend Topics in Political Polarization Research (1974–2026)

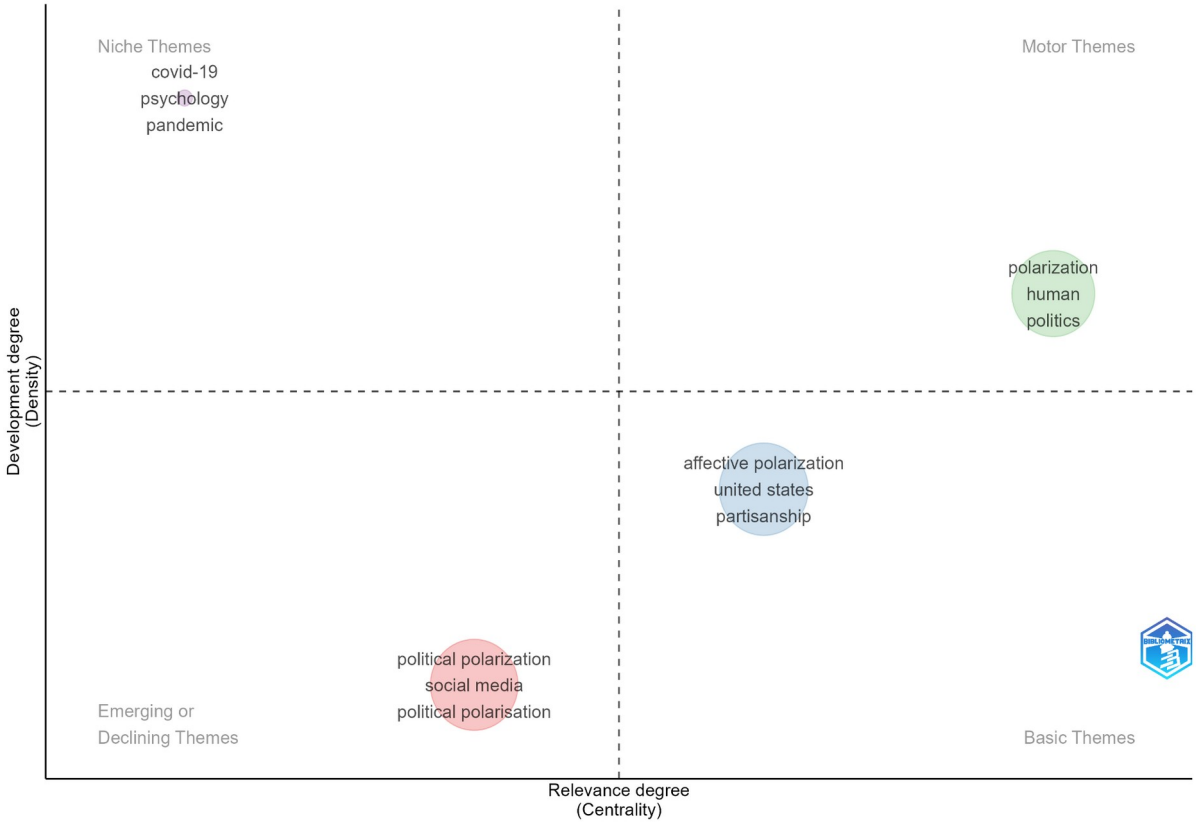


Source: Author's analysis using Bibliometrix (Biblioshiny).

Figure 1 depicts the trend topics in political polarization research from 1974 to 2026. Earlier trend topics included urban politics, political parties, and migration. Since 2018, themes such as partisan polarization, selective exposure, news media, and leadership have become more salient, indicating a shift in research interests toward political communication and media effects. After 2020, the field expanded, with the most prominent topics being political polarization (666), affective polarization (377), polarization (259), social media (167), human (134), and United States (118). More recent topics, such as governance approach, artificial intelligence, and political power, emerged between 2024 and 2026, reflecting the evolution of the field toward governance discourses, new

technologies, and modern political issues. The findings demonstrate a clear evolution from traditional political themes to interdisciplinary research emphasizing digital media, behavioral dynamics, and technology-driven political polarization.

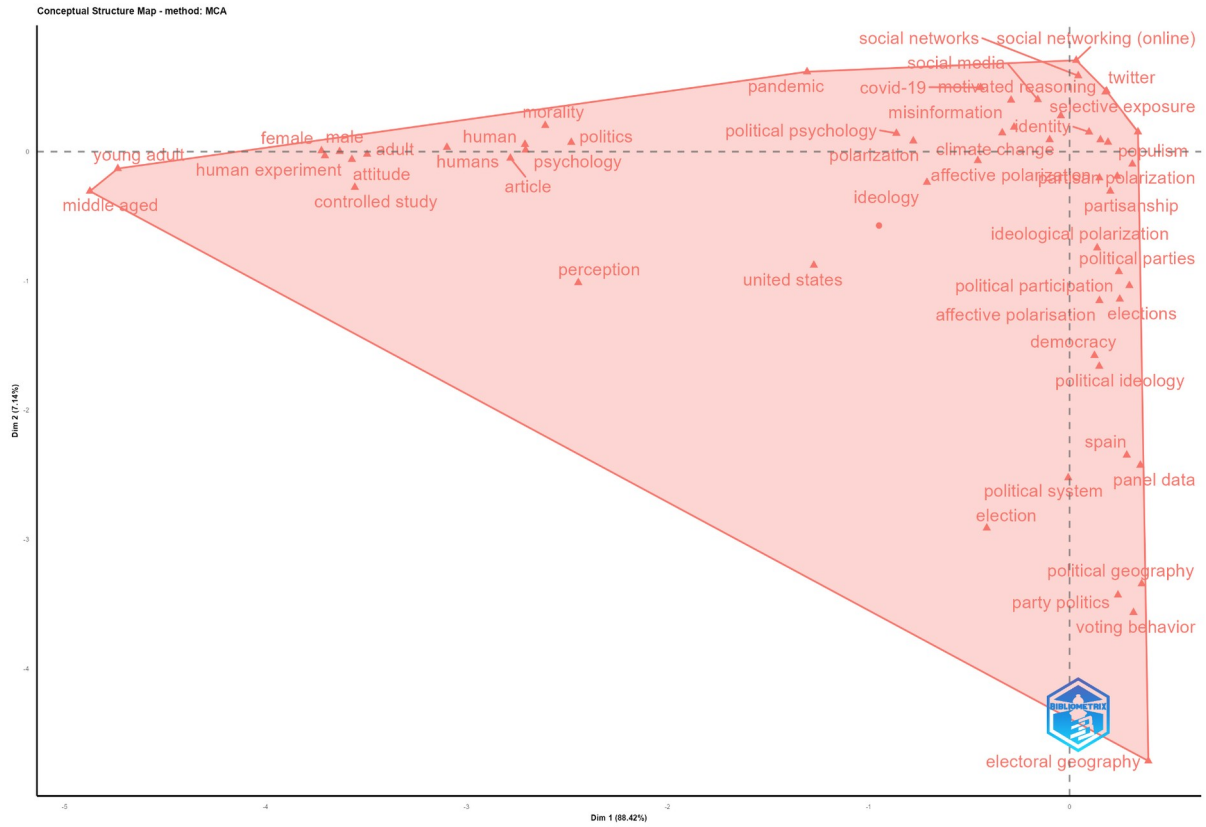
Figure 2. Thematic Map of Political Polarization Research Based on Keyword Co-occurrence



Source: Author's analysis using Bibliometrix (Biblioshiny).

Figure 2 shows the thematic structure of political polarization research based on Callon's centrality and density, with themes located in four quadrants: Motor Themes, Basic Themes, Niche Themes, and Emerging or Declining Themes. The cluster 'polarization' (frequency = 1,490) falls in the Motor Themes quadrant, indicating a central and well-developed theme that drives the field. The "affective polarization" cluster (frequency = 1,740) falls in the middle of the Basic Themes quadrant, with United States and partisanship, indicating a core, well-connected research area with comparatively lower thematic development. The "political polarization" cluster (frequency = 1,681) falls under the Emerging or Declining Themes quadrant and is affiliated with social media, suggesting that this research stream is emerging and could have potential for further development. The "COVID-19" cluster (264) is situated in the Niche Themes quadrant, indicating a focused, internally developed topic with comparatively weak links to the wider literature. Overall, the thematic map shows that polarization research has developed from specialized topics into a full-fledged, interdisciplinary, and influential research area.

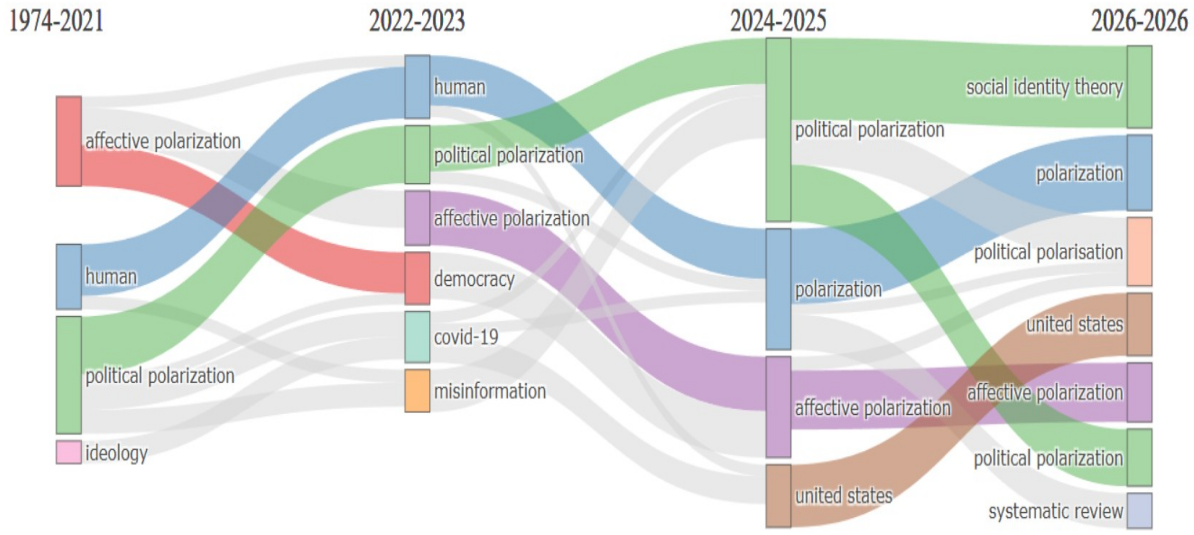
Figure 3. Conceptual Structure Map of Political Polarization Research Based on Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA)



Source: Author's analysis using Bibliometrix (Biblioshiny).

Figure 3 shows the conceptual structure of political polarization research derived from Multiple Correspondence Analysis (MCA) of author keywords. The map shows a single dominant conceptual cluster, suggesting that the field is not split into separate subfields, but rather is very interconnected. The core concepts include political polarization, affective polarization, polarization, social media, public opinion, political communication, and political psychology, highlighting current research themes on political behavior, media influence, and psychological aspects of polarization. The central research stream is closely linked to topics like misinformation, Twitter, social networking, identity, motivated reasoning and COVID-19, which reflect the increasing entanglement of digital communication and online political discourse. Themes such as electoral geography, voting behavior, party politics, political systems and Spain, however, lie farther from the conceptual center and are therefore more specialized or context-specific. As the MCA map shows, political polarization research has become a unified and interdisciplinary field including political science, communication studies, psychology and digital media studies, and social media and affective polarization have become important conceptual areas.

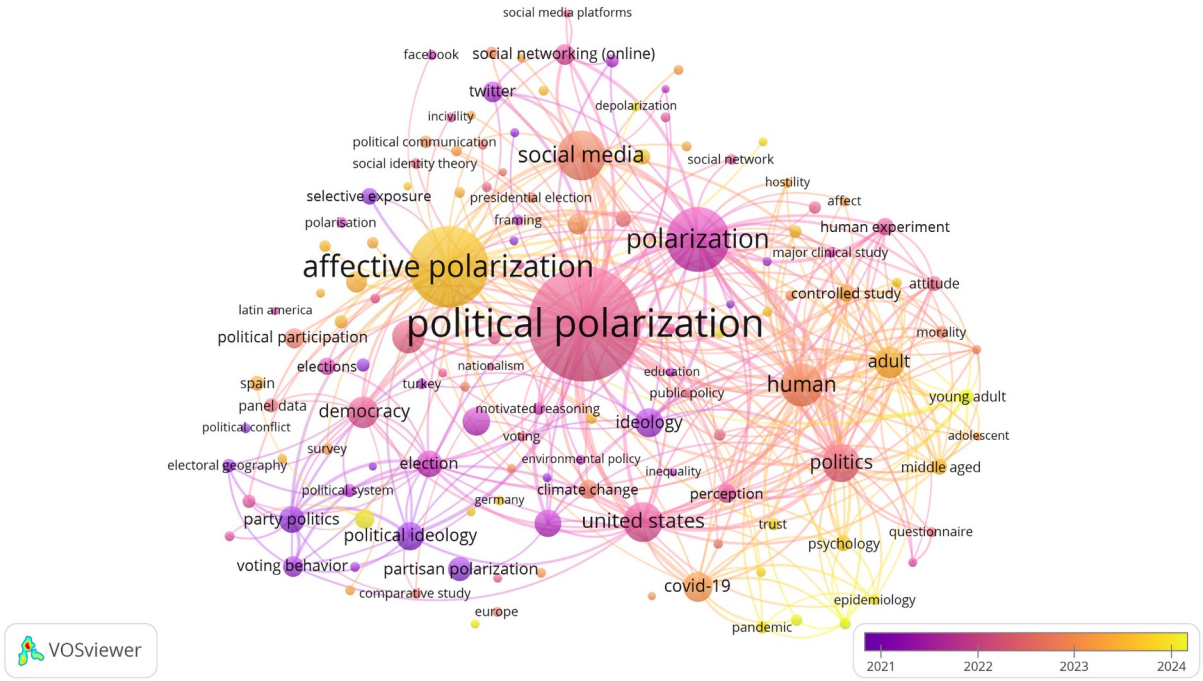
Figure 4. Thematic Evolution of Political Polarization Research (1974–2026)



Source: Author's analysis using Bibliometrix (Biblioshiny).

Figure 4 depicts the thematic evolution of political polarization research across four periods (1974–2021, 2022–2023, 2024–2025, and 2026). The Sankey diagram illustrates how major research themes changed over time while retaining conceptual continuity. Political polarization, affective polarization, and human were the initial themes of the field. Between 2022 and 2023, new themes linked to global health crises and political communication, such as COVID-19, misinformation, and democracy, emerged. In 2024–2025, the field consolidated around political polarization, polarization, affective polarization, and the United States. In 2026, research expanded to include new topics such as social identity theory, systematic reviews, and AI-related political communication, while political polarization, polarization, and affective polarization remained the most prevalent and consistent themes. Political polarization shows the strongest thematic continuity, developing throughout all periods and embracing current issues like social media, misinformation, echo chambers, selective exposure, and artificial intelligence, reflecting the growing interdisciplinarity and maturity of the discipline.

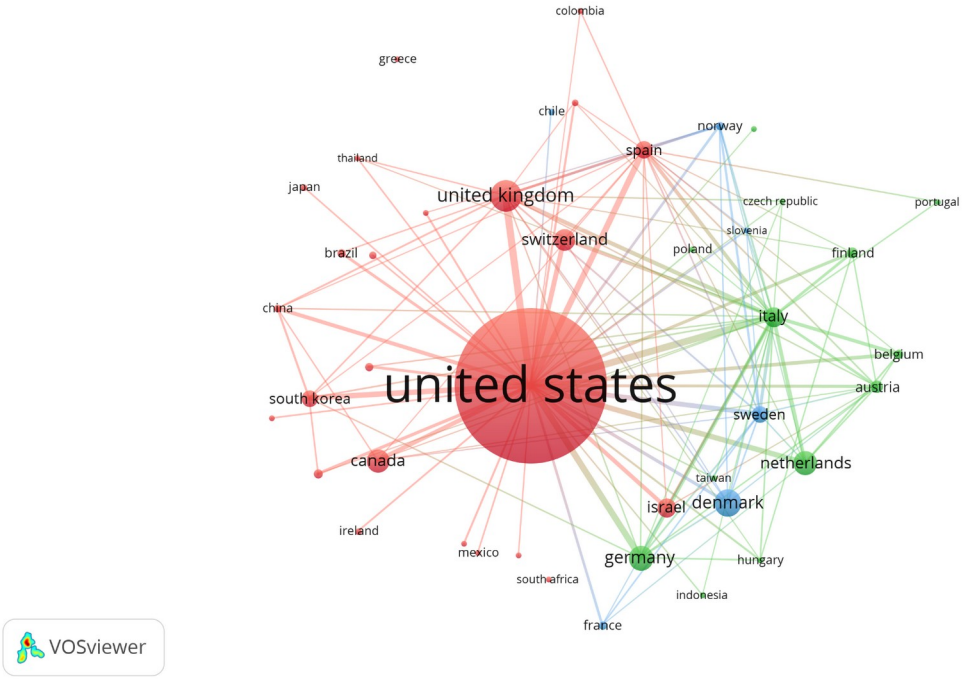
Figure 5. Overlay Visualization of Keyword Co-occurrence in Political Polarization Research (VOSviewer)



Source: Author's analysis using VOSviewer.

Figure 5 presents an overlay visualization of keyword co-occurrence, showing temporal changes in research themes. More frequent keywords are depicted as larger nodes, and political polarization (666 occurrences), affective polarization (376), polarization (259), social media (167), human (134), United States (118), and politics (109) are the most prominent research topics. The color gradient shows the chronological evolution of the field: purple denotes keywords in earlier research, such as political ideology, party politics, partisan polarization and election. Orange-colored keywords, such as political polarization, social media, human, and COVID-19, signal topics that came to the fore in the middle phase of the study period. Yellow-colored keywords, such as affective polarization, middle aged, young adult, epidemiology and psychology represent the most recent research interests. The strong interconnections among the larger nodes indicate a highly interdependent research field, in which polarization research increasingly connects with social networks, affective and behavioral research, and public health, reflecting the interdisciplinary development of the literature.

Figure 6. Citation Network of Countries in Political Polarization Research



Source: Author's analysis using VOSviewer.

Figure 6 shows the global citation network of the countries involved in research on political polarization. The visualization shows three prominent citation clusters, with the United States as the main center. The United States showed the highest research influence, with 819 publications, 36,245 citations, and the highest total link strength (680), connecting it with a wide range of countries. Because VOSviewer assigns publications to all co-authoring countries, these figures differ from the corresponding-author counts reported in Tables 6 and 7. The United Kingdom, Spain, Canada, Switzerland, and China are the main countries of the red cluster that are well connected with the United States. A second cluster around Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Sweden and Belgium is based on the strong European involvement in the field. The third cluster comprises Denmark, France, and Norway, which serve as important bridges between the larger research groups. The network shows that political polarization research is globally interrelated, with the main centers of scholarly influence and cross-border knowledge exchange located in North America and Europe.

5. Discussion

The bibliometric findings demonstrate substantial growth and diversification in the scholarly literature on political polarization. Publication activity remained relatively limited during the earlier decades of the dataset but increased markedly in recent years, particularly after 2020. The thematic and conceptual analyses further indicate that the literature has expanded beyond its earlier emphasis on ideological, partisan, and institutional dimensions to incorporate affective polarization, social media, misinformation, political communication, governance, and emerging technological issues. These findings should be interpreted as changes in the structure and emphasis of the research literature, rather than as evidence that political polarization itself has necessarily increased or changed in the same manner. Nevertheless, the diversification observed in the bibliometric results is consistent with prior scholarship that conceptualizes polarization through multiple ideological, affective, psychological, communicative, and contextual dimensions (Erdogan et al., 2026; van Baar & FeldmanHall, 2022; Wilson et al., 2020).

A second important finding concerns the geographical structure of the literature. The United States accounted for the largest share of corresponding-author publications and accumulated the highest total number of citations in the dataset, demonstrating a substantial

concentration of scholarly activity and citation visibility in U.S.-based research. This pattern is consistent with previous reviews reporting a strong concentration of U.S. samples in particular areas of polarization research, including studies of media and computational approaches (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021; Németh, 2023). At the same time, the presence of European, Asian, and other countries in the publication and collaboration analyses indicates that the research base extends beyond the United States. The comparatively high rates of multiple-country publications observed for several countries also point to an international collaborative component within the field. These bibliometric patterns support the need for further cross-national research, particularly because existing scholarship has emphasized the importance of examining polarization across different electoral, media, and institutional contexts (Larreguy & Tiburcio, 2026; Moolathingal & Namrata, 2025; Wagner, 2024).

The science-mapping analyses provide further evidence of thematic diversification. Keyword co-occurrence, thematic mapping, and thematic-evolution analyses identify affective polarization, social media, misinformation, political communication, and related digital themes as prominent components of the contemporary literature. More recent records also contain themes associated with artificial intelligence and governance. Importantly, these patterns indicate increasing scholarly attention to these topics; they do not, by themselves, establish that social media, misinformation, or artificial intelligence causes or intensifies political polarization. Such causal relationships require evidence from primary empirical studies. Previous research has examined associations and effects involving media exposure, selective exposure, and polarization, while also showing that findings can vary across media environments, platforms, audiences, and political contexts (Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021; Wang et al., 2026). Thus, the present bibliometric results complement this literature by showing where scholarly attention has become concentrated rather than testing the underlying causal relationships.

The conceptual analyses also indicate increasing connections among political polarization, affective polarization, social media, public opinion, political communication, and political psychology. This pattern suggests that the scholarly knowledge structure of political polarization research has become increasingly interdisciplinary, connecting political science with psychology, communication, sociology, and computationally oriented research. The finding should therefore be understood as evidence of intellectual and thematic integration within the literature, rather than as evidence that polarization itself operates identically across these disciplinary or societal contexts. The emergence and interconnection of these themes reinforce the value of interdisciplinary approaches for studying a phenomenon that prior scholarship has examined from psychological, communicative, institutional, and technological perspectives (Erdogan et al., 2026; van Baar & FeldmanHall, 2022).

Taken together, the findings reveal a research field characterized by rapid recent growth, geographical concentration alongside international collaboration, and increasing thematic and disciplinary diversification. They also identify areas that remain comparatively less visible within the mapped literature. Future research could therefore strengthen the field through greater cross-national comparison, broader representation of under-researched regions and social settings, and continued integration of political, psychological, sociological, communication, and computational perspectives. In particular, the emergence of artificial intelligence, governance, and digitally mediated communication as recent research themes provides opportunities for future studies to examine these topics using empirical designs capable of evaluating relationships and causal mechanisms that bibliometric analysis itself cannot establish.

5.1 Study Implications

This study has theoretical, methodological, practical and policy implications. Theoretically, it traces the evolution of political polarization research from ideological concerns toward affective, communicative, technological, and governance dimensions. Methodologically, the integration of performance analysis and science mapping offers a structured overview of publication growth,

influential contributors, collaboration patterns, conceptual relationships, and thematic change. Practically, the results can help researchers identify major journals, authors, countries, and emerging topics for collaboration, topic selection, and publication planning. The importance of social media, misinformation, affective polarization, and the use of AI highlights the need for policymakers and public institutions to strengthen media literacy, ensure clear platform governance, and adopt inclusive and transparent communication strategies. From a sociological perspective, the study underscores the need to treat polarization as a social process affecting trust, identity, participation, and social cohesion. Overall, the findings support stronger interdisciplinary research and democratic and social-policy responses to polarization.

5.2 Study Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations. First, it uses only Scopus, so relevant publications indexed elsewhere may be missing. Second, only English-language journal articles and reviews were included, which may introduce language and document-type bias. Third, the search was limited to titles and keywords, which may exclude studies that address polarization substantively without mentioning it in these fields. Fourth, bibliometric data reveal patterns of influence and connection but do not evaluate the substantive importance of individual studies. Future studies could draw on multiple databases and non-English literature, examine regional and disciplinary trends, and combine bibliometric analysis with systematic reviews, content analysis, or meta-analysis. Special focus is also needed on less well-represented areas, intervention research, and new areas of artificial intelligence, governance and social policy.

6. Conclusion

This study analyzed the global development of political polarization research from 1974 to 2026 using a comprehensive bibliometric approach. The results reveal sustained growth in publications, especially since 2020, and an increasingly interdisciplinary character spanning political science, sociology, communication, psychology, and computational research. The research focus has shifted from ideological, party-based polarization toward affective polarization, social media, misinformation, political communication, and AI. In addition, the study identified influential authors, journals, countries, publications, collaboration networks, and thematic structures, and showed continued geographical concentration in North America and Europe. By combining performance analysis with science mapping, the study provides a broader picture of the intellectual structure and maturity of the field and its development over time. It also identifies key areas for further comparative, inclusive and policy-relevant research. The study provides a basis for future research on understanding and mitigating polarization’s impact on democratic participation, institutional trust, public communication and social cohesion.

Declarations

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions (CRediT)

Ammaji Rajitha: Conceptualization, Methodology, Data Curation, Formal Analysis, Visualization, Investigation, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review & Editing.

Ethics Approval and Informed Consent

Not applicable. This study is based exclusively on bibliographic data obtained from Scopus and did not involve human participants or animals.

Data Availability

The bibliographic data analyzed in this study were retrieved from the Scopus database on 24 July 2026. Due to database licensing restrictions, the complete raw dataset is not publicly deposited. The analyzed data may be made available by the author upon reasonable request, subject to Scopus licensing and database-access conditions.

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