pro-metrics

The trajectory of symbolic politics as an area of study and research: A bibliometric analysis of the literature in Scopus

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ABSTRACT

Objective. This study examined the trajectory of symbolic politics as an area of study by analyzing the Scopus-indexed literature. The objective of this study was to delineate the temporal evolution, structural characteristics, authorship patterns, and citation impact of research on symbolic politics.

Design/Methodology/Approach. A descriptive bibliometric analysis was performed on 2,939 documents published from 1950 to 2024 and indexed in Scopus. The study analyzed several factors, including scientific production and growth, document types, source journals, and their distribution using Bradford's law, authorship and collaboration patterns based on Subramanyam's index, and citation impact. Quantitative indicators were supplemented with qualitative insights derived from highly cited documents and their main thematic areas.

Results/Discussion. The findings indicated a late but rapid acceleration in the consolidation of research on symbolic politics, with nearly three-quarters of publications appearing after 2010. The extant literature was dispersed across a wide array of journals, exhibiting a paucity of concentration of sources and a marked long-tail distribution. The prevailing authorship patterns were predominantly single-authored, though there has been a modest yet perceptible rise in collaborative endeavors in recent years. A thorough citation analysis revealed a highly skewed distribution, with influence concentrated in a small number of broad, interdisciplinary contributions. The relationship between citation impact and publication age was only moderately significant.

Conclusions. Symbolic politics has evolved into a conceptually influential yet institutionally decentralized research domain. The study underscores the notion of symbolic politics as a paradigmatic example of how interdisciplinary fields evolve and accrue influence within the contemporary scholarly communication landscape.

KEYWORDS: symbolic politics; bibliometric analysis; historical politics; scientific production; citation impact; authorship patterns.

1. INTRODUCTION

THE CONCEPT of symbolic politics has emerged in various research domains that underscore the significance of meaning, identity, and emotion in political and social existence. Preliminary research in the domain of political psychology indicated that individual political stances frequently elude complete rationalization through self-interest calculations. Instead, preferences are influenced by symbolic tendencies, emotional responses, and value-based connections formed over the course of long-term socialization (Sears *et al.,* 1980). These results have created a broader space for analyzing how symbols serve as fundamental elements of political judgment, going beyond simple instrumental views of behavior. Subsequent theoretical and empirical research have expanded this perspective by delineating symbolic politics as a form of political engagement in which emotionally charged representations, narratives, and collective memories are of central importance. Research has demonstrated that symbolic attitudes frequently exert a more substantial influence on political positions than material interests, particularly in cases where policy issues are characterized by their abstract nature, indirect nature, or their distance from daily experience (Crano, 1997). Rather than being a deviation from rationality, symbolic politics emphasizes the cognitive and emotional mechanisms through which political meaning is created, maintained, and replicated over time. As the concept evolved, the use of symbolic politics to analyze collective identities, nationalism, and political conflict beyond individual attitudes became increasingly prevalent. Research on ethnic mobilization and violent conflict has highlighted the role of group myths, historical narratives, and symbolic boundaries in shaping political behavior and limiting elite decision-making (Kaufman, 2006). From this perspective, symbolic politics elucidates the reasons why conflict and polarization persist even when material incentives for compromise are present, emphasizing the independent power of symbolic frameworks in shaping political outcomes.

Concurrent advancements were observed in policy-oriented and sociological research, wherein symbolic politics was utilized to examine domains characterized by heightened public visibility and active communication. In the disciplines of environmental governance and criminal justice, scholars have observed that symbolic actions, discursive commitments, and performative policy gestures frequently supplant authentic change, functioning to manage public expectations and enhance legitimacy (Blühdorn, 2007; Newburn & Jones, 2005). These uses expanded the reach of symbolic politics, rendering it a versatile analytical instrument pertinent to governance, institutional practices, and public discourse. At a more structural level, sociological approaches rooted in theories of symbolic power connected symbolic politics to ongoing processes of domination and legitimation. According to Swartz (1996), the application of Bourdieusian theory illuminates the manner in which symbolic practices function as mechanisms that facilitate the establishment and perpetuation of social hierarchies and political authority within discrete domains of influence. This perspective served to reinforce the interdisciplinary character of symbolic politics, thereby establishing a nexus between political analysis and diverse fields of enquiry such as cultural sociology, social theory, and the study of knowledge creation.

When considered as a whole, these varied lines of inquiry demonstrate the dissemination of the concept of symbolic politics across various disciplines, theoretical traditions, and empirical domains. However, this intellectual growth has largely occurred in a fragmented manner. The extant research on symbolic politics is dispersed across a variety of journals, fields, and methods, often developing in isolation without systematic connections. While seminal studies have influenced pivotal debates within specific subfields, there is a paucity of quantitative evidence regarding the growth of symbolic politics as a field, the increase in its research output over time, or the distribution of its influence across various publication venues and research communities. In this context, bibliometric analysis offers a valuable framework for studying the development of symbolic politics from a meta-scientific perspective. The objective of this study is to examine the trajectory of symbolic politics as a research field through a bibliometric review of Scopus-indexed literature. Specifically, the

study aims to (i) describe the long-term growth of scientific production on symbolic politics, (ii) examine the distribution of publications by document type and source journal, (iii) analyze authorship and collaboration patterns, and (iv) identify influential contributions and primary thematic orientations through citation analysis.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed a descriptive, longitudinal bibliometric design based exclusively on frequency counts, cumulative measures, averages, and ratios. The application of qualitative analysis to select bibliometric indicators serves to complement quantitative results, thereby providing a contextual framework for interpreting numerical patterns within the broader context of disciplinary and conceptual developments.

2.1. Data source and retrieval

The study was based on bibliographic records retrieved from Scopus (Elsevier), which were selected for their broad multidisciplinary coverage. A search strategy was implemented that was based on the titles of documents, with the objective of ensuring a high degree of conceptual precision and of retrieving documents in which the subjects of symbolic politics and closely related terms constituted the core analytical focus. The final search query was defined as follows:

> *(TITLE (symbolic politic) OR TITLE (historical politics*) OR TITLE (politics of memory) OR TITLE (political past)) AND PUBYEAR > 1949 AND PUBYEAR < 2025 AND (LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ar") OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "ch") OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "re") OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "bk") OR LIMIT-TO (DOCTYPE , "cp")).**

The time span (1950-2024) was deliberately selected to encompass the field's entire historical development, from its earliest scholarly works to its most recent contributions. The final dataset encompassed 2,939 documents, including journal articles, book chapters, review papers, books, and conference papers.

2.2. Data extraction, preprocessing, and calculation procedures

The records were exported in CSV format, including the publication year, document type, source title, authorship details, and citation counts. The dataset was meticulously examined to ensure its consistency with respect to publication years and document types. Authorship information was managed at the document level by calculating the number of authors per publication. Relational disambiguation procedures, such as author clustering or network construction, were not performed, as the analysis was constrained to the evaluation of descriptive indicators. The analysis focused on a restricted set of the following bibliometric indicators, selected for their ability to characterize the field's trajectory.

2.2.1. Scientific production and growth

The evolution of scientific production was analyzed by tracking the annual number of publications, which was determined by counting the documents published each year during the study period. Cumulative production was subsequently calculated as the running total of publications over time, thereby enabling the visualization of the historical buildup of research output. To assess the growth of scientific production, the study calculated the average annual growth rate of the literature over the entire period under consideration. This measure was based on changes in publication volume over time and was informed by Price's (1965) concept of the exponential growth of science, which explains how scientific fields expand through continuous increases in publication output. The utilization of this metric was descriptive and longitudinal, eschewing the implementation of mathematical growth models.

2.2.2. Source journals

The distribution of publications across source journals was examined by calculating the number of documents published in each journal. The journals were then evaluated based on their productivity, and a core group of the most prolific sources was identified. The analysis was

guided by Bradford's (1948) law of journal dispersion, which was used descriptively to evaluate the concentration or dispersion of literature across journals.

2.2.3. Authorship and collaboration patterns

The authorship patterns were examined using two complementary indicators. First, the mean number of authors per document was calculated by dividing the total number of author occurrences by the total number of documents. This measure provided an overview of the prevailing mode of knowledge production in the field. Second, the degree of collaboration was calculated using Subramanyam's (1983) classical formulation:

$$C = \frac{N\_m}{N\_m + N\_s}$$

where N_m represented the number of multi-authored documents (two or more authors), and N_s represented the number of single-authored documents. This index, ranging from 0 to 1, quantified the relative prevalence of collaborative research within the corpus.

2.2.4. Citation impact and influential documents

The citation impact was determined based on the absolute citation counts per document, without the application of normalization by year or field. The most cited documents in the corpus were identified and subsequently analyzed as markers of intellectual influence. These documents were examined qualitatively for their thematic focus and conceptual orientation, enabling the discussion to relate citation prominence to the field's dominant research lines and theoretical approaches.

2.3. Limitations

This study is not without its limitations. First, reliance on Scopus alone may result in an underestimation of the number of publications indexed in other databases. Second, the title-based search strategy, while offering high conceptual specificity, may have excluded relevant works that address symbolic politics implicitly or with different terminology. Finally,

the descriptive character of the analysis does not disclose relationships among authors, institutions, or themes. The implementation of network-based approaches, which would be necessary to reveal such relationships, is beyond the scope of this study.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Scientific production and growth

A close examination of the temporal distribution of publications reveals a noticeable yet steadily increasing trend in research on symbolic politics and related concepts. During the early period of the examined time frame, from 1950 to the late 1980s, scientific production was limited (Table 1). During this period, publication activity was characterized by sporadic occurrence, with the majority of years yielding a solitary publication and protracted interstices between contributions. By the conclusion of the 1980s, the aggregate output remained below 20 documents, suggesting that symbolic politics had not yet emerged as a significant domain of scholarly inquiry. A steady rise in publication output became noticeable during the 1990s. Despite the modest annual production, the number of publications increased more consistently, indicating the rise of symbolic politics as a recognized topic in academic research. This trend persisted into the early 2000s, when yearly output surpassed 20 publications for the first time, marking a shift from sporadic and marginal production to a more stable research path. The most substantial expansion occurred subsequent to 2010. During this period, annual production exhibited robust and sustained growth, indicative of the consolidation of symbolic politics as a dynamic and expanding field of study. From 2010 to 2024, the collection underwent a substantial expansion, with a growth of over 1,800 documents, representing more than 60% of the total publications in the dataset. The highest annual output was observed in 2023, with 242 published documents, marking the peak of scientific productivity in the entire studied period. Despite a decline in publication numbers to 174 in 2024, this decrease appears to be a short-term fluctuation rather than an indication of a long-term decline in growth.

Subperiod	Publications	Share of total (%)	Time span (years)
1950-1969	9	0.31	20
1970-1989	88	2.99	20
1990-2009	579	19.70	20
2010-2024	2,263	77	15
Total	**2,939**	**100**	—

Table 1. Scientific production on symbolic politics by subperiods (1950-2024).

Cumulative production further underscores this trend. The accumulation curve demonstrates gradual, almost linear growth during the initial five decades, subsequently exhibiting a pronounced upward trend from the early 2010s onwards. By 2024, cumulative production had reached 2,939 documents, indicative of the substantial growth and institutionalization of research on symbolic politics over time. An analysis of annual growth rates reveals significant variability, particularly in the most recent decade. For instance, there was an approximate 30% increase in publication output between 2022 and 2023, followed by a decline of around 28% between 2023 and 2024. These fluctuations indicate a dynamic growth pattern, characterized by periods of accelerated growth interspersed with brief periods of decline. This phenomenon aligns with classical observations on the growth of scientific fields, as articulated by Price, wherein sustained long-term expansion occurs in conjunction with nonlinear annual fluctuations rather than steady linear growth.

3.2. Source journals

As demonstrated in Table 2, journal articles comprise the majority of publications, with 1,708 documents (representing 58.1% of the total). A total of 687 book chapters were identified, constituting 23.4% of the documented material. This is followed by 310 review papers, which account for 10.5% of the total. Books account for 198 publications (6.7%), while conference papers are infrequent, with 36 documents (1.2%). This distribution has direct methodological implications for source analysis. While journal articles and review papers are consistently linked to standardized source titles in Scopus, books and many book

chapters often lack source title information. Consequently, as indicated by the presence of empty source fields in certain records, the efficacy of the system is called into question. These documents were incorporated into the analysis of scientific production and growth. However, only records with valid source titles were used in the analysis of source journals and their dispersion.

Document type	Publications	Share (%)
Article	1,708	58.1
Book chapter	687	23.4
Review	310	10.6
Book	198	6.7
Conference paper	36	1.2
Total	**2,939**	**100**

Table 2. Distribution of document types in the corpus.

The analysis of source journals was conducted on documents with identifiable source titles, comprising 2,112 documents (journal articles and review papers). The findings indicate that research on symbolic politics is disseminated across a variety of journals, with no particular journal exhibiting dominance. As demonstrated in Table 3, the most prolific journal is *Memory Studies,* with 24 publications, followed by *Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies,* with 21 documents. Other frequent publication venues include *Istoriya,* with 16 documents, *History and Memory,* with 14 documents, *Europe-Asia Studies* and *Nationalities Papers,* both with 13 documents. A second tier of journals, such as *East European Politics and Societies* and *Ethnic and Racial Studies,* contributed 10 documents each, while numerous other journals published fewer than 10 papers.

Source journal	Publications
Memory Studies	24
Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies	21
Istoriya	16
History and Memory	14
Europe-Asia Studies	13
Nationalities Papers	13
East European Politics and Societies	10
Ethnic and Racial Studies	10
Central European History	8
International Journal of Heritage Studies	8

Table 3. Most productive source journals (top 10).

The distribution of source titles was analyzed using Bradford's law, which was applied descriptively. The journals were then ranked in descending order of productivity and divided into three zones, with each zone accounting for approximately one-third of the total publications with valid source information. The results, summarized in Table 4, demonstrate that a core group of 156 journals (Zone 1) accounts for 701 publications, corresponding to 33.2% of the total. Zone 2 requires 484 journals to account for a comparable share (706 publications; 33.4%), while Zone 3 includes 705 journals contributing 705 publications (33.4%). This distribution indicates a minimal degree of source concentration. While a limited number of journals function as recurrent publication venues, a substantially larger number of journals is required to sustain the aggregate volume of research output. This phenomenon is particularly evident in interdisciplinary research domains where there is an absence of a predominant publication outlet. These disciplines and themes are supported by a range of academic publications, including various disciplinary and thematic journals.

Bradford zone	Journals (n)	Publications (n)	Share of publications (%)
Zone 1 (Core)	156	701	33.2
Zone 2	484	706	33.4
Zone 3	705	705	33.4
Total	**1,345**	**2,112**	**100**

Table 4. Distribution of source journals ccording to Bradford's law.

3.3. Authorship and collaboration patterns

An analysis of authorship patterns across analogous subperiods reveals a gradual, albeit restricted, shift in collaborative research practices. As indicated in Table 5, the earliest period (1950-1969) is characterized entirely by single-authored publications, with an average of 1 authors per document and a collaboration index (C) of 0, indicating no co-authored research during this early stage.

Subperiod	Documents	Average authors per document	Single-authored	Multi-authored	Subramanyam's C
1950-1969	9	1	9	0	0
1970-1989	88	1.22	74	14	0.159
1990-2009	579	1.17	499	80	0.138
2010-2024	2,263	1.36	1,716	547	0.242
Total	**2,939**	**1.32**	**2,298**	**641**	**0.218**

Table 5. Authorship and collaboration indicators by subperiod.

From 1970 to 1989, there was an emergence of collaborative authorship, though it remained an infrequent phenomenon. Multi-author papers constituted 14 of the 88 publications, and the average number of authors per paper marginally increased to 1.22, resulting in a Subramanyam collaboration index of 0.159. This phenomenon can be attributed to the early adoption of collaborative efforts, despite the prevailing culture of individual publications. From 1990 to 2009, despite a considerable surge in publication volume, there was no proportional increase in collaborative patterns. The average number of authors per document exhibited a slight decline, reaching 1.17, while the collaboration index decreased to 0.138. This suggests that the field's growth during this period was predominantly driven by individual authorship rather than by an increase in collaboration among research teams. A more pronounced shift was observed in the most recent period (2010-2024). The average number of authors per document increased to 1.36, and multi-authored publications increased to 547 documents, resulting in a collaboration index of 0.242. Despite the persistent dominance of single-authored works, this period exhibits the highest level of collaboration observed across the entire timeframe, suggesting a modest yet discernible trend toward increased co-authorship in recent years.

3.4. Citation impact and influential documents

The comprehensive dataset amassed a total of 42,434 citations, exhibiting an average of 14.44 citations per document and a median of 3 citations. The substantial disparity between the mean and median values indicates a distribution that is markedly skewed, with a small number of publications accounting for a disproportionate share of the total impact (Table 6).

Indicator	Value
Total documents	2,939
Total citations	42,434
Average citations per document	14.44
Median citations per document	3

Table 6. Citation indicators for the corpus.

The analysis reveals a modest positive correlation ($r = 0.178$) between the age of a document and the number of citations it receives. This finding indicates that older publications tend to accrue more citations over time. However, publication age alone does not fully account for the impact of citations within a given field. As demonstrated in Table 7, while numerous highly cited works date back to the 1980s and 1990s, a significant number of influential contributions emerged in the 2000s and 2010s. The 10 documents that have been cited most frequently in the corpus were published between 1980 and 2012. Collectively, these 10 documents account for a significant portion of the total volume of citations, thereby underscoring their central role in shaping the field.

Rank	Year	Citations	Title
1	1999	2,225	Historical institutionalism in comparative politics
2	1981	1,436	Prejudice and politics: Symbolic racism versus racial threats to the good life
3	2011	1,050	Trauma and the memory of politics
4	2005	840	The long civil rights movement and the political uses of the past
5	1980	634	Self-interest vs. symbolic politics in policy attitudes and presidential voting
6	1985	522	Historical alternatives to mass production: Politics, markets and technology in nineteenth-century industrialization
7	2005	494	The politics of path dependency: Political conflict in historical institutionalism
8	2012	404	The politics of gender after socialism: A comparative-historical essay
9	2008	367	National humiliation, history education, and the politics of historical memory: Patriotic education campaign in China
10	1986	356	Symbolic racism: Problems of motive attribution in political analysis

Table 7. Top 10 most cited documents.

A qualitative analysis of the abstracts and author keywords associated with these highly cited works reveals recurring themes. First, the primary focus is on research pertaining to symbolic racism, prejudice, and political attitudes, particularly in studies that examine the relationship between symbolic representations and policy preferences. Second, prominent frameworks such as historical institutionalism, path dependency, and critical junctures emphasize the role of symbolic processes in shaping long-term political and institutional change. Third, a significant proportion of the most frequently cited literature focuses on collective memory, trauma, and the politics of the past. This body of literature links symbolic politics with memory studies, identity formation, and post-conflict or post-authoritarian contexts. The final theme that is prevalent is that of civil rights, nationalism, education, and post-socialist transformations. This final theme illustrates how symbolic politics are applied to politically significant issues that are both social and historical in nature.

4. DISCUSSION

The bibliometric results offer a clear perspective on the consolidation of symbolic politics as a research field, which has undergone a late but rapid development, characterized by substantial growth and a wide array of themes. Contrary to the notion of an immediate and well-defined emergence of symbolic politics as a field of study, it is evident that the development

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of this concept underwent a protracted period of conceptual evolution. A historical analysis of scientific production reveals that symbolic politics did not initially constitute a distinct research domain. For a considerable duration, publications were intermittent and lacked cohesion, indicating that early contributions were frequently integrated into broader discourses rather than acknowledged as a distinct discipline. The marked increase in output observed after 2010 signifies a pivotal moment at which symbolic politics emerged as a pervasive analytical reference across various disciplines. However, this expansion has not been accompanied by a robust institutional consolidation process. A thorough analysis of the source journals reveals a notable dispersion, with a diminutive core constituting a mere one-third of the aggregate output, while numerous outlets contribute intermittently. From a bibliometric perspective, this weak concentration of sources reflects the interdisciplinary nature of symbolic politics. However, it also demonstrates a conspicuous absence of a centralized forum where theoretical and methodological debates are systematically integrated. In contrast to more established fields, which tend to prioritize a select number of flagship journals, symbolic politics remains structurally dispersed, relying on a variety of disciplinary venues to support its development.

Authorship patterns provide further evidence to support this interpretation. The persistent predominance of single-authored publications, accompanied by a modest yet steadily rising collaboration index, suggests that research in symbolic politics continues to adhere to intellectual traditions more characteristic of the humanities and interpretive social sciences. Despite the recent surge in publication output, collaborative research remains an exception rather than the prevailing norm. Although the slight increase in co-authorship after 2010 may reflect broader trends toward collaboration in academia, it does not imply a fundamental shift in how research on symbolic politics is conducted. The application of citation analysis has been demonstrated to contribute substantial qualitative insight to the structural observations reported. The distribution of citations is highly skewed, and there is a weak correlation between publication age and citation impact. These findings suggest that influence in the

field is not solely determined by the length of time that something has been published. Conversely, the most frequently cited works tend to provide theoretical frameworks or thematic perspectives that span multiple disciplines. The prevalence of themes such as symbolic racism, historical institutionalism, collective memory, and the politics of the past indicates that symbolic politics exerts its most significant influence when it provides concepts that link micro-level attitudes to macro-level historical or institutional processes. Consequently, the impact of citations is more closely associated with the comprehensiveness of a concept and the interpretive depth of the research than with the methodological intricacy.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings indicate a transition in symbolic politics from a marginal, loosely connected set of contributions to a more established but scattered research field, with the majority of its scholarly output occurring in the last 15 years. From a bibliometric perspective, the study of symbolic politics demonstrates the capacity for contemporary research domains to proliferate rapidly while maintaining diversity, as evidenced by the absence of convergence around a limited set of journals or collaborative frameworks. Subsequent studies could facilitate the identification of clandestine intellectual communities within the dispersed configuration of symbolic politics research. Furthermore, the incorporation of methodological diversity, encompassing mixed-methods and collaborative approaches, has the potential to establish novel connections between the field's extensive conceptual heritage and the evolving empirical methodologies.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

Contribution statement

Conceptualization, investigation, methodology, validation: Zhaslan Nurbayev, Zhangylsyn Kiyubek.

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Writing-original draft, writing-review & editing: Zhaslan Nurbayev.

Statement of data consent

The data generated during the development of this study have been included in the manuscript. 🖥

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