

DEMOCRACY AND DEMOCRATISATION IN AFRICA: INSIGHTS FROM A BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS, 1948-2024

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Abstract: This study presents a bibliometric analysis of research on democracy and democratisation in Africa, using 7,892 Scopus-indexed documents from 1948 to 2024. Employing VOSviewer and Bibliometrix, we map the intellectual landscape in order to identify dominant trends, contributors, and thematic clusters. Findings reveal three publication phases aligned with continental political shifts: post-independence, the 1990s democratisation wave, and current democratic backsliding. Although South Africa, the USA, and the UK dominate the scholarly output on democracy and democratisation in Africa, a persistent North-South bias marginalises African-based researchers. While elections and governance are central, digital authoritarianism and military rule remain underexplored. The article advocates for a paradigm shift toward causal analysis and a more inclusive research agenda, addressing both geographical and epistemological gaps in the field to advance the future of African studies.

Keywords: *democracy, democratisation, Africa, bibliometrics, research trends*

Introduction

How has the international academic community studied democracy and democratisation in Africa? What does this body of work reveal about the priorities, blind spots and evolving concerns within this field? Surprisingly, this question has been the subject of very few systematic studies. Although the volume of research on African democracy has increased considerably since the early 1990s, no bibliometric study has yet mapped out the landscape of this output as indexed in the Scopus-indexed research. This article aims to fill this gap.

The process of democratisation in Africa has been shaped by a combination of colonial legacies (Ayittey 2010), post-independence ideologies, and the contemporary forces of globalisation and digitalisation (Cheeseman and

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Sishuwa 2021). Prior to its adoption, most African states were entrenched in an authoritarian single-party system (Robinson 1994). With the imposition of foreign aid conditionality as a lever for democratic governance in Africa (Vidal 2023), the failure of authoritarian regimes and structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s (Cheeseman and Fisher 2019), the early 1990s saw the emergence of a broad democratisation movement (Bratton 1997). This movement was greeted with enthusiasm (Ake 1991). Several states then embarked on processes of political transition, often described as a “wave of democratisation,” to use Samuel Huntington’s term (1991). The aim was to eliminate dictatorial rule and the one-party system, giving the people the opportunity to choose their leaders.

The national conference, a key mechanism in this process of change, has become one of the most emblematic instruments of this period of transition for certain African countries (Otayek 2001). Originally merely instruments of consultation (Chike, Ngonadi and Chike 2023), national conferences soon took a radical turn. From the outset, debates intensified and the demand for popular sovereignty took centre stage (Bratton and Van de Walle 1994). Conference participants demanded a complete overhaul of the Constitution and a reorganisation of the country’s institutions (Daloz and Quantin 1997). These demands were accompanied by calls for free and transparent elections and far-reaching economic and political reforms.

For other states, however, the democratisation process involved anticipating demands. This dynamic gave rise to two main democratisation strategies: the offensive strategy and the defensive strategy (Mann 2024). The offensive strategy referred to a process of democratisation whereby the state anticipated popular demands. States chose to undertake constitutional or political reforms to respond to the aspirations of civil society before these escalated into open crisis or violent protests (Ukaegbu, Idowu and Chukwuma 2024). This strategy was often used proactively by governments seeking to legitimise their power while opening up politically (Tom 2024).

Conversely, the defensive strategy was characterised by a process of democratisation in which the ruling regime did not engage in dialogue, but undertook constitutional and political reforms under intense pressure, often following internal or external crises. Reforms carried out in this context were more often dictated by specific circumstances, such as mass strikes, popular demonstrations or international pressure (Arkin and Chappell 1985). Unlike the offensive strategy, which was proactive, the defensive strategy was more reactive.

For other countries, such as Senegal, The Gambia, Cape Verde, Mauritius and Lesotho, which had already embarked on reform processes well before the early 1990s (García-Ponce and Wantchekon 2024), this transition process was part of an early trend towards political openness.

Whatever path was taken, the process of democratisation in Africa has led to the establishment of democratic institutions, notably a multi-party system (Walzer and Roman 1997), political, economic and trade union pluralism, the holding of contested elections, and the drafting and adoption of new constitutions. An examination of the new constitutions revealed the predominance of "techniques of freedom" over techniques of authority. It was through the force of law that political actors sought ways and means to bring about genuine change (Chabal 1998). This was driven by National Conferences, constitutional conventions, democratic transitions and multiparty elections (Mann 2024).

However, the results of this vast undertaking are mixed. Democracy takes time to learn, and resistance of all kinds still needs to be overcome (Recchia 2020). Indeed, the rule of law is constantly undermined by despotism (Orkin 1995) and attempts to return to authoritarianism (Bourne and Veugelers 2022). Many countries do not fully embody democratic principles (Butler 2005). Some experiments are undermined by persistent underdevelopment, armed conflict, leaders' desire to remain in power, underdevelopment and military coups (Ahluwalia 2024). Although democratic principles were championed at conferences, most leaders established oppressive regimes after independence (Ayittey 2010). Similarly, the ethnic diversity of African states fosters a competitive environment based on the mobilisation of ethnolinguistic groups in order to secure political support (Mann 2024). Despite sophisticated constitutional frameworks, structural challenges (instability, erosion of public trust) undermine democratic consolidation.

The complexity of implementing democracy in Africa may lie in the fact that the concept of "democracy" has not yet been given a universally accepted or consensual definition. Since ancient times, this concept has never been linear or monolithic. Although the meaning of democracy has evolved over time and across different contexts, its definition and meaning remain the subject of constant disagreement (Gallie 1955). Generally speaking, democracy represents the ideal system of governance or the ideal to be achieved, characterised by popular sovereignty, the rule of law, the accountability of those in power, and the protection of human rights (Ake 1992).

The study of democracy in Africa is a complex field of research due to the diversity of the continent's political, historical, and cultural contexts. This

study is of paramount intellectual importance and undeniable political urgency. Since the early 1990s, African states have undergone successive political transformations: from multiparty transitions to competitive authoritarianism, from hopes of democratic consolidation to the harsh realities of democratic backsliding (Diamond 2015). The study of democracy in Africa is of paramount intellectual importance and undeniable political urgency. Since the early 1990s, Afrobarometer data have consistently shown that, across the continent, a majority of citizens favour democratic governance and express dissatisfaction with how it functions (Lavallée 2006). Understanding how researchers have approached these realities, which themes they have prioritised, which voices have influenced the debate, and which questions remain unanswered is essential for advancing research and public policy.

The present bibliometric study provides a quantitative methodology for examining trends in scientific publishing, including article authorship, citation networks, collaboration patterns, and shifts in research focus (McBurney and Novak 2002; Hood and Wilson 2001). This approach makes it possible to identify the intellectual foundations of a field, reveal structural inequalities in knowledge production and highlight research areas that are systematically neglected. To achieve this, we have structured this work as follows. The section entitled '*Collaborative Networks*' provides an overview of research on democracy and democratisation in Africa: the themes addressed, the theoretical frameworks employed and the critiques formulated. The subsequent section presents the methodology and research materials utilised in this article. The section titled '*Bibliometric Analysis and Results*' outlines the bibliometric findings across four axes: publication trends, collaboration networks, citation patterns, and thematic clusters. The following section acknowledges the limitations of the study, while the final part presents the discussion and future research directions.

The aim is to make a threefold contribution: first, to produce an exhaustive bibliometric mapping of this field of research; second, to highlight a systemic tension between the predominance of researchers from Northern countries in citation statistics and the contributions of African theorists of democracy; and third, to propose a concrete research programme focused on causal analysis, geographical diversification, and epistemological inclusion.

The State of Research on Democracy and Democratisation in Africa

To put the following bibliometric findings into context, it is necessary to identify what researchers have actually been studying in this field, not the

development of democracy in Africa as a political phenomenon, but the academic debate itself including its major themes, dominant frameworks, and ongoing discussions.

Main Research Themes

The concept of "democracy" has its roots in ancient Greece, where both the word and the practice originated, with the system defined as popular power or rule by the demos (Shivji 1991). In modern literature, the foundations of liberal democracy were laid by social contract theorists such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke (Ake 1992). They conceptualised democracy as a voluntary association centred on property rights, individualism, and the rule of law, a model that became the political counterpart of the market (Ake 1992). While democratisation is the path taken, democracy is the quality of the resulting institutional framework (Clapham 1993). Conversely, democratisation is defined as a process of transition, a historical movement aimed at transforming an autocratic, military or single-party regime into a pluralist system (Kratou and Laakso 2022).

The academic literature on democracy and democratisation in Africa is multidisciplinary and thematically diverse. The following themes form the core of the field. Electoral processes and regime transitions constitute the oldest and most extensive area of research. Researchers such as Bratton and Van de Walle (1994), Lindberg (2006), and Cheeseman and Sishuwa (2019) have studied multiparty elections, neo-patrimonial governance, and the conditions under which competitive elections either strengthen or, conversely, undermine democratic consolidation. This literature is extensive: Lindberg's book, *Democracy and Elections in Africa* (2006), is among the most cited works in the Scopus corpus analysed here.

Democratic backsliding and competitive authoritarianism are becoming an increasingly significant trend, as the initial optimism regarding the African "third wave" has given way to an analysis of what Diamond (2015) terms the "democratic recession." Researchers are documenting the use of constitutional manipulation to expand executive power (Beardsworth, Siachiwena and Sishuwa 2022), the resurgence of military coups described by Mann (2024) as a return to the "khaki regime," and the rise of digital authoritarianism through internet shutdowns during election periods (Ngoa and Song 2024).

Governance, the rule of law, and civil society form an important whole. Researchers are studying the integrity of electoral commissions (Makunya 2022), the role of anti-corruption institutions and the dynamics of decentralisation

(Mohmand and Loureiro 2017), and the relationship between corruption and public trust (Lavallée 2006).

There is growing interest in gender, women's rights, and the quality of democracy. Studies are examining the impact of gender quotas, women's participation in social movements, and the intersection of democratisation with public health outcomes such as maternal and neonatal mortality (Phillips et al. 2024; Ngoa and Song 2024).

Political economy and redistribution form a central thematic focus in the works of Claude Ake and Issa Shivji. Ake (1991, 1992) argued that liberal democracy, as it has been transplanted to Africa, serves the interests of the elites without regard for the material conditions of the majority, giving rise to what he termed an "alienation of democracy." Similarly, Shivji (1991) emphasised that, without a redistributive dimension, democracy remains an empty shell. These arguments have influenced a strand of research that establishes a link between the quality of democracy, economic inequalities, and structural dependence.

International influences and geopolitics are an emerging theme. Studies examine how the conditionality of Western aid shapes democratic reform (Vidal 2023), how Chinese and Russian engagement offers African leaders alternatives to Western political conditionality (Li 2017), and how diaspora communities contribute to political polarisation through digital advocacy. The impact of information and communication technologies (ICT) is an emerging topic (Ngoa and Song 2024). The literature examines how the internet and social media foster citizen mobilisation while enabling a new form of "digital authoritarianism" through deliberate Internet shutdowns during election periods (Beardsworth, Siachiwena and Sishuwa 2022).

African democratic theory constitutes a fundamental yet under-represented strand of thought. Beyond Ake and Shivji, figures such as Ali Mazrui, Achille Mbembe, and George B. N. Ayittey have each proposed original analytical frameworks for understanding governance and political power in Africa. Mazrui's analysis of the intersection between ethnicity, religion, and state power (Mazru 1999); Mbembe's conceptualisation (2000) of postcolonial sovereignty and "necropolitics"; and Ayittey's critique of institutional dysfunction (2010) all have significant implications for democratic theory.

State of the Literature: Critical Assessments

The literature on African democracy has been the subject of several substantive criticisms. First, it is often described as being overly descriptive

and theoretical: many studies document democratic failures without drawing on formal social theory to explain the causal mechanisms at play (Mohmand and Loureiro 2017; Phillips et al. 2024). Second, the field exhibits a significant geographical imbalance: the majority of the most cited works are produced by researchers based in Northern countries, while African researchers face systemic barriers, including limited access to data and research funding (Mohmand and Loureiro 2017). Third, analytical tools developed for consolidated Western democracies are sometimes applied to African contexts without sufficient consideration of their transferability. Fourth, research tends to treat military coups as anomalies rather than examining how military regimes constitute and shape the political systems that succeed them (Mann 2024). Fifth, the role of women in liberation struggles and democratisation processes remains chronically understudied (Phillips et al. 2024).

The present analysis aims to map these trends quantitatively, providing empirical evidence to support claims regarding the structure of the field, its dominant voices, and its silences.

Research Materials and Methodology

We will now outline the data source and research strategy, as well as the analytical methods.

Data Source and Search Strategy

This study draws on data extracted from the Scopus-indexed research, one of the largest repositories of peer-reviewed scientific literature, covering a wide range of disciplines: social sciences, political science, law, and African studies (Klapka and Slaby 2018). The search query used was: TITLE-ABSTRACT-KEYWORD ("democracy" OR "democratisation") AND ("Africa"), limiting the search to documents in English only. The search was conducted on 19 September 2024 at 3 :43 pm and identified 7,892 documents published between 1948 and 2024.

The choice of Scopus over Web of Science (WoS) is due to its broader coverage of the social sciences and its more comprehensive indexing of journals focusing on Africa. It is important to note, however, that both databases systematically under-represent non-English-language publications and journals from the Global South. This limitation has direct

consequences for the visibility of academic work in African languages and of Francophone or Lusophone intellectual traditions, particularly major works by authors such as Mbembe and Shivji, some of which are published in non-English formats.

The difference of 49 documents between the frequency of the term "democracy" (1,064 occurrences) and that of the term "Africa" (1,015 occurrences) in the keyword analysis warrants a methodological clarification. This discrepancy is explained by the fact that the co-occurrence analysis of keywords is based on keywords assigned by the authors, which differ from the search terms used to construct the corpus. A small subset of documents extracted by the search equation uses "democracy" as a keyword but does not mention "Africa" as a separate keyword; this is likely because the geographical scope is implied in the title or abstract, rather than being explicitly stated. These documents deal with democracy in African contexts and are legitimately part of the corpus.

Regarding the inclusion of the period prior to 1960: the analysis deliberately begins in 1948, the first year for which relevant indexed documents appear in Scopus, in order to provide a comprehensive historical overview of the development of the field. The virtual absence of documents between 1948 and 1959 is in itself instructive: it confirms that the systematic study of democracy in Africa did not precede decolonisation. Limiting the analysis to data from after 1960 would obscure this conclusion.

Analytical Methods

The analysis employs a combination of descriptive, quantitative and semantic techniques, in line with established bibliometric practices (Dharmani, Das and Prashar 2021). Three analytical dimensions are explored. The performance analysis examines publication output over time; the most productive authors, institutions, and countries; the citation impact.

Scientific mapping uses VOSviewer (version 1.6.20) and Bibliometrix (R package) to generate (a) co-authorship networks, identifying collaborative groups; (b) co-citation networks, identifying the intellectual foundations of the field; and (c) keyword co-occurrence maps, revealing the thematic structure.

The chronological analysis divides the corpus into three periods 1948-1989, 1990-2014, and 2015-2024 in order to track changes in themes, authors, and geographical focus over time.

An important methodological caveat applies to the interpretation of results

relating to keyword frequency. The terms "democracy," "democratisation," and "Africa" appear frequently in the corpus because they were used as search terms; their prevalence reflects the selection criteria rather than an independent finding. The analytically interesting results concern themes that were not preselected: "elections," "governance," "apartheid," "civil society," "gender," and "coups d'état". Therefore, the analysis of the thematic results focuses on these emerging terms.

Bibliometric Analysis and Results

Overview of the Corpus

Table 1 presents the main characteristics of the corpus of 7,892 documents.

Parameter	Value
Duration	1948–2024
Total documents	7,892
Annual growth rate	7.71%
Average age of documents	11,4 years
Average no. of citations per document	15,58
Total references	360,241
Articles	5,115 (64.81%)
Books	724 (9.17%)
Book chapters	1,406 (17.81%)
Reviews	390 (4.94%)
Total authors	8,809
Single-author documents	5,207
Co-authors per document (average)	1,53
International co-authors (%)	10.68%

Table 1. Key Information on Documents Published on Democracy in Africa in the Scopus-Indexed (1948–2024)

Source: Scopus-Indexed (1948–2024)

The corpus is dominated by journal articles (64.81%), followed by book chapters (17.81%), and books (9.17%). The relatively high proportion of single-author documents (5,207 out of 7,892) and the low average co-authorship rate (1.53 authors per document) reflect the tradition of the humanities and social sciences that characterises much of the research in this field. The international co-authorship rate of 10.68% indicates limited transnational collaboration beyond established North-South academic partnerships.

Publication Trends: A Three-Phase Evolution

Figure 1 illustrates the annual output of documents in the corpus. Three phases can be identified analytically. During the first phase (1948–1989), research output was sparse and the context was colonial. The virtual absence of indexed publications prior to 1960 confirms that the systematic study of democracy in Africa did not precede decolonisation. This is an observation of definite methodological interest. Output remained modest throughout the 1970s and 1980s, reflecting both the dominance of single-party and military regimes on the continent and Africa’s relative marginalisation in Western social sciences during the Cold War.

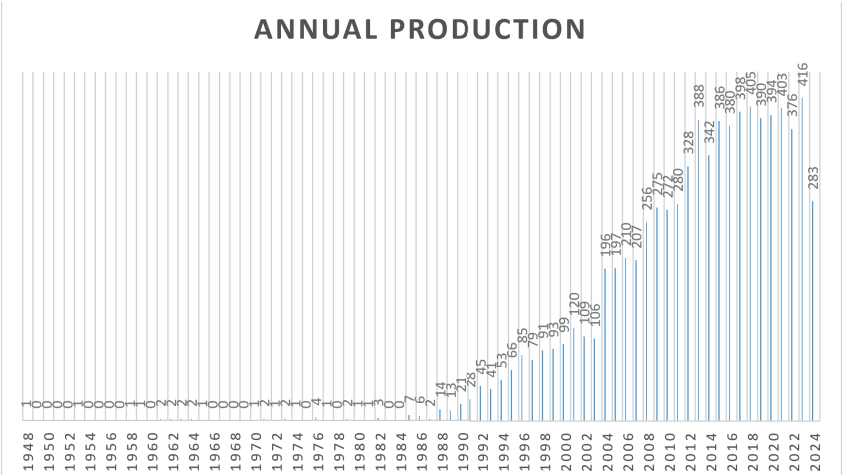


Figure 1. Annual Output of Documents on Democracy and Democratisation in Africa, Scopus 1948–2024
Source: Scopus-Indexed (1948–2024).

In the second phase (1990–2014), which was characterised by the wave of democratisation and its consequences, the number of publications rose sharply from the early 1990s onwards, coinciding with the "third wave" of democratisation (Huntington 1991), the proliferation of multiparty elections, and donors' growing interest in democratic governance as a condition for their aid (Vidal 2023). This period saw the consolidation of studies on democracy as a recognised sub-discipline, with the emergence of specialist journals such as *Democratization* and *African Affairs*. The intellectual contributions of Ake (1991; 1992; 1993) and Shivji (1991) were particularly significant during this period, challenging the liberal-democratic paradigm exported from the West and emphasising the need for a democracy rooted in African socio-economic realities.

The third phase was characterised by democratic decline and new challenges. Academic output continued to grow, reaching 416 publications in 2023, with researchers focusing on a new political landscape marked by the resurgence of military coups (Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Gabon), the sophistication of electoral manipulation, the influence of digital technologies on political mobilisation and repression, and the growing role of non-Western actors, notably China and Russia (Li 2017; Mann 2024). The theoretical frameworks of Mbembe and Mazrui have taken on new relevance during this period, with analysts examining the postcolonial dimensions of the collapse of the state and sovereign authority.

Collaborative Networks

This section will examine, in turn, author collaboration, collaboration at national level, and institutional affiliations.

Author Collaboration

The co-publication network reveals seven distinct collaborative groups, operating largely independently of one another. The two most significant groups in structural terms are organised around Wasserman (the largest in terms of membership) and Southall (the most interconnected in terms of co-authored publications). An essential methodological clarification is required: the centrality of Wasserman and Southall reflects their structural position within the co-publication network that is, the frequency and density of their joint publications rather than their intellectual influence, as measured by the total number of citations. Researchers such as Diamond, Cheeseman, Lindberg, Bratton and Van de Walle have a greater impact in

terms of citations across the field as a whole, and figures such as Mbembe, Mazrui, and Shivji carry greater theoretical weight in African democratic thought, but their collaborative contributions within the corpus indexed by Scopus are structurally different. The over-representation of South African institutions in the co-publication network partly reflects their relative institutional capacity and their adherence to English-language publication standards.

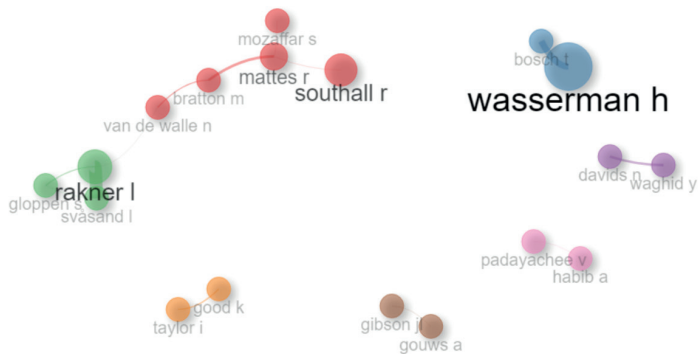


Figure 2. Author Collaboration Network, Visualised Using VOSviewer
Source: Scopus-Indexed (1948–2024)

Collaboration at National Level

Rank	Country	Collaborative publications (%)
1	United States	11.00%
2	United Kingdom	9.16%
3	South Africa	8.99%
4	Canada	6.51%
5	Australia	5.89%
6	Germany	5.58%
7	France	4.18%
8	Kenya	3.10%
9	Sweden	2.94%

Rank	Country	Collaborative publications (%)
10	Ghana	2.48%
11	China	2.48%
12	Italy	2.32%
13	India	2.32%
14	Norway	2.01%
15	Cameroon	1.70%
16	Switzerland	1.55%
17	Denmark	1.24%
18	Tunisia	0.93%
19	Tanzania	0.93%
20	South Korea	0.93%

Table 2. The Top 20 Countries in Terms of International Collaborative Publications on Democracy in Africa

Source: Scopus-Indexed (1948–2024).

Data on collaboration at the national level (Table 2) reveal a striking asymmetry: the United States (11%) and the United Kingdom (9.16%) alone account for more than a fifth of international collaborative publications on African democracy. South Africa is the only sub-Saharan African country to feature in the top three. This situation reflects broader structural inequalities in global knowledge production, which Mohmand and Loureiro (2017) describe as the dominance of "guest researchers" from Northern countries. This corroborates Ake's (1991) long-standing critique that African political science has been disproportionately influenced by external theoretical agendas. The virtual absence of research institutions from Central and West Africa within this network constitutes a significant gap, even as these regions experience some of the continent's most turbulent democratic upheavals.

Institutional Affiliations

South African universities, notably the University of Cape Town, the University of the Witwatersrand, and Stellenbosch University, are the most productive institutions in the corpus. Their pre-eminence can be

explained both by historical factors (the post-apartheid democratisation process sparked keen interest among researchers) and by their institutional capabilities (South African universities have more advanced research infrastructure than most other African institutions).

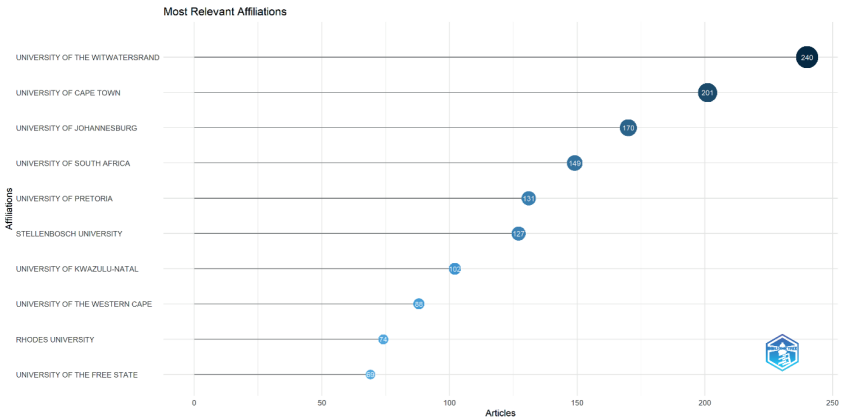


Figure 3. The Most Productive Institutional Affiliations in the Corpus
Source: Scopus-Indexed (1948–2024).

Publication and Citation Patterns

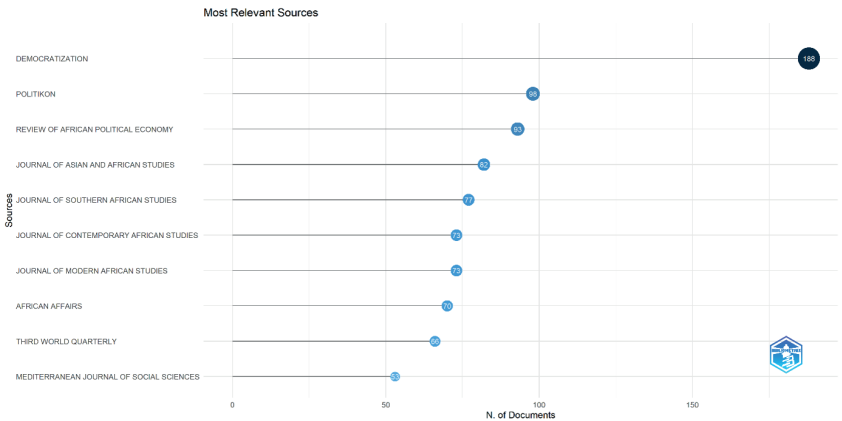


Figure 4. The Most Relevant Sources in the Corpus
Source: Scopus-Indexed (1948–2024).

The most prolific journal in the corpus is Democratization (188 articles), followed by *Politikon* (98) and *Review of African Political Economy* (93). The predominance of Democratization reflects the field's affiliation with comparative politics and transition studies. The importance of *Review of African Political Economy* is significant. Founded in 1974, this journal has always been a vehicle for disseminating critical perspectives in political economy, notably thanks to contributions from researchers such as Shivji and Ake, who are less prominent in traditional citation statistics. This suggests that the traditions of political economy and African theory are present in the corpus, but they are structurally under-represented by citation-based indicators.

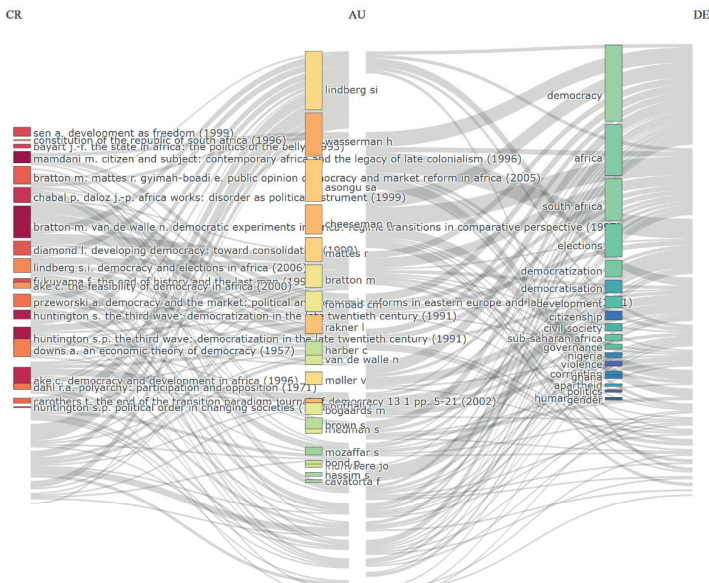


Figure 5. Three Field Plot

Source: Scopus-Indexed (1948-2024).

The three-panel diagram of Figure 5 illustrates the relations between the most cited works (left), the most cited authors (centre), and the most frequently associated themes (right). Among the most cited seminal works are Huntington's *The Third Wave* (1991), Lindberg's *Democracy and Elections in Africa* (2006) and Sen's *Development as Freedom* (1999). The most frequently cited authors are Lindberg, Diamond, Bratton, and Mamdani. The themes associated with these authors revolve around

elections, governance, civil society and the comparative analysis of political regimes.

One notable observation: while Ake and Shivji are founding theorists in the field and feature in this corpus, their citation counts are lower than those of Bratton or Lindberg, partly because some of their key texts circulate outside English-language databases and partly because their critical framework lies outside the dominant paradigm of comparative politics. This bibliometric result should not be interpreted as a measure of intellectual importance, but rather as an artefact linked to database coverage and disciplinary hegemony.

Thematic Analysis

This section will present the keyword co-occurrence map, analyse the clusters relating to democracy and democratisation in Africa extracted from the Scopus database, and examine the evolution of these themes over time

Keyword Co-Occurrence Map

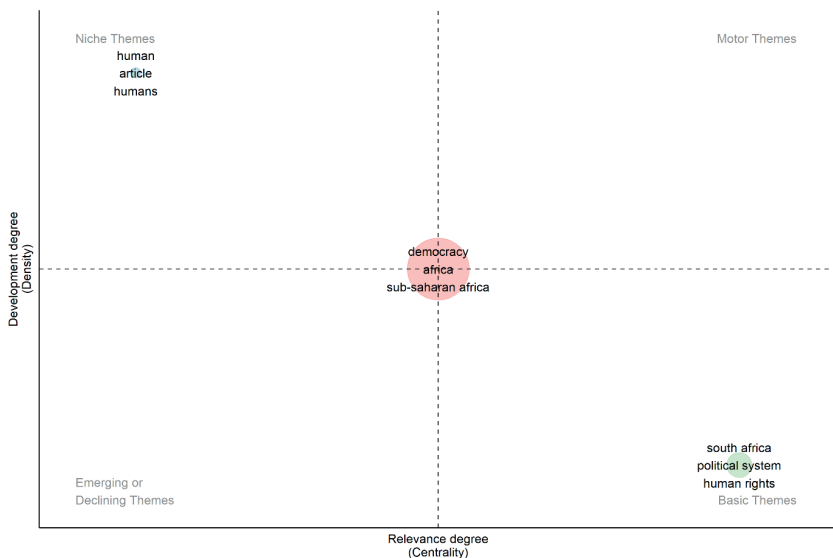


Figure 6. Thematic Map

Source: Scopus-Indexed (1948–2024).

The thematic map of Figure 6 organises keywords along two axes: centrality (relevance within the field) and density (internal development). Four quadrants identify driving themes (high centrality and density), fundamental themes (high centrality and low density), niche themes (low centrality and high density), and emerging or declining themes (low centrality and density).

The absence of a driving theme as a central, well-developed subject that guides the field of study is in itself significant from an analytical perspective. It suggests that the field lacks a dominant, structuring research agenda, with efforts instead being scattered across multiple parallel discussions. "South Africa," "political systems," and "human rights" emerge as fundamental themes: essential to the field of study, but insufficiently developed given their importance. These are areas that require more sustained and theoretically rigorous work.

The co-occurrence analysis of keywords identifies the following emerging themes, which were not pre-selected, as the most analytically relevant: "elections" (1,247 co-occurrences), "governance" (934), "apartheid" (876), "civil society" (521), "gender" (389), "coups d'état" (312), and "corruption" (298). These themes, which were not included in the search equation, represent the true research priorities in the field. Among them, coups d'état and gender are particularly under-represented given their political significance, a finding consistent with the thematic gaps identified in the section on the state of research on democracy and democratisation in Africa.

Cluster Analysis

The VOSviewer clustering analysis identifies seven thematic clusters within the corpus. The analysis below describes each cluster based on its constituent keywords, with a focus on emerging (non-preselected) terms that are of analytical significance.

Group 1 (Pink, 272 items): South African democracy and the post-apartheid transition. The dominant terms in this group, apartheid, racial inequalities, education, and reconciliation reflect research focused on South Africa's democratic experience since 1994. This is the largest group, reflecting the country's disproportionate presence in the corpus. Although this body of work is substantial, its sheer volume risks giving the impression that South Africa's trajectory is representative of sub-Saharan Africa as a whole.

Group 2 (Green, 260 entries): Electoral processes and authoritarian transitions. Keywords include elections, authoritarianism, regime transitions, multiparty

systems, and North Africa. This group follows the core comparative tradition, analysing transitions from one-party and military regimes to competitive electoral systems. The inclusion of North Africa is noteworthy and reflects inter-regional comparative work.

Group 3 (Blue, 214 items): Political systems, human rights, and gender. This group encompasses governance, the rule of law, human rights, and women's rights, reflecting the intersection between democratisation and rights-based frameworks. The inclusion of gender confirms that this is an established, yet still underdeveloped, research theme.

Group 4 (Yellow, 166 items): Economic development and democratic quality. The keywords establish a link between democratisation and economic growth, redistribution, poverty, and structural adjustment. Intellectually, this group follows the tradition of critical political economy established by Ake, Shivji, and Ayittey, although the frequency with which these authors are cited in Scopus-indexed publications remains lower than their theoretical influence would warrant.

Group 5 (Purple, 85 members): State-building and institutional development. Focusing on the capacity of African states to sustain democratic institutions, this group addresses issues of decentralisation, administrative reform, and citizen participation.

Groups 6 and 7 contain only two and one element respectively ("world", "hemisphere", "festivals") and represent either isolated thematic nodes or thematic nodes in decline.

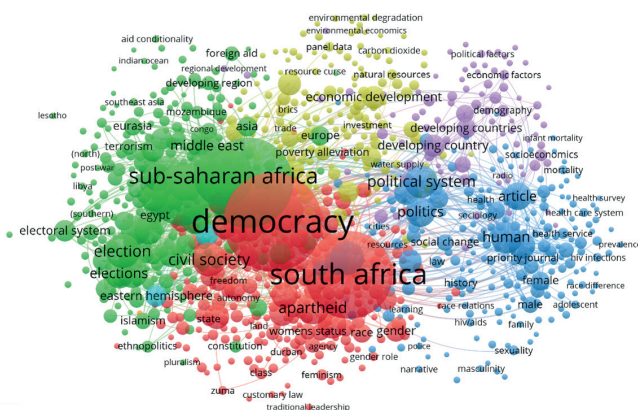


Figure 7. Cluster Classification

Source: Scopus-Indexed (1948–2024).

Changes in Themes Over Time Across Three Periods

A temporal breakdown of the keyword co-occurrence data across the three periods identified in the subsection entitled *Publication Trends: A Three-Phase Evolution* reveals significant shifts in thematic focus.

Before 1990, the limited literature available focused mainly on independence, state-building and the theoretical legitimacy of the one-party system themes addressed in the seminal works of Ake, Mazrui, and the first generation of African political scientists.

Between 1990 and 2014, research shifted radically towards elections, transitions and civil society. The works of Bratton, Diamond, and Lindberg came to dominate the field. Gender began to emerge as a research topic. The tradition of political economy persisted, but remained somewhat on the fringes of the mainstream of comparative politics.

Between 2015 and 2024, several emerging themes have taken on considerable significance: military governance and coups d'état (Mann 2024), digital authoritarianism and internet shutdowns (Ngoa and Song 2024), the influence of China and Russia (Li 2017) and academic freedom as a prerequisite for democratic resilience (Kratou and Laakso 2022). This period is also marked by a renewed interest in African democratic theory, with researchers exploring non-Western analytical frameworks in order to explain dynamics that liberal-democratic models struggle to account for.

Limitations

This research has certain limitations inherent to bibliometric analyses. First, this study relies solely on the co-occurrence of keywords to identify themes and trends, which could be influenced by the indexer. Second, we used integral counting methods in co-author networks, which could lead to slightly different results if fractional counting were used. We developed the cluster using VOSviewer; other software may yield different results. Finally, other publications on democracy in Africa were not included in this analysis, as they are not indexed in the Scopus-Indexed. Future studies may consider other databases such as Web of Science (WOS). Despite these limitations, our study provides useful insights for academics and practitioners interested in democracy in Africa.

Third, the use of full counting rather than fractional counting in co-authorship networks means that papers with multiple authors are each given

full credit in the tally for each author, which may overestimate the output of prolific contributors.

Fourth, VOSviewer represents only one possible partitioning of the thematic space; other software or parameters may produce slightly different clusterings. The results should therefore be regarded as illustrating general trends rather than definitive thematic boundaries.

Despite these limitations, the study provides a comprehensive quantitative basis for understanding the structure of academic output on democracy in Africa – a basis which, to the author’s knowledge, did not previously exist in this specific field.

Discussion and Future Research Directions

The aim here is to analyse the thematic gaps in the field of democracy in Africa and to propose a programme for future research.

Thematic Gaps in the Field

Bibliometric analysis both confirms and challenges current understandings of the field. This is due to its multidisciplinary nature, its growth in tandem with political shifts, and the prominent place of elections and governance amongst the central research themes. It also confirms the structural inequality in knowledge production that critical researchers have long highlighted: institutions in the Global North produce and receive the lion’s share of citations, while researchers based in Africa, particularly those outside South Africa, remain under-represented in globally indexed publications, based on data extracted from the Scopus-Indexed.

Beyond the lack of theoretical knowledge, the analysis identifies several thematic areas that are under-represented relative to their political significance.

Military governance and democratic continuity: Mann (2024) argues that military regimes are not merely interruptions in democratic trajectories, but rather represent the political systems that succeed them. Research has tended to view coups d’état as anomalies rather than as constitutive political events. The current wave of coups d’état in the Sahel demands a systematic academic response.

Similarly, digital authoritarianism such as Internet shutdowns, manipulation (Phillips et al. 2024) and surveillance technologies is reshaping the landscape of political protest in Africa. Although this theme has emerged in the most recent period studied, it remains under-theorised given its scale.

Furthermore, despite the growing literature on gender and democratic quality, the specific role of women in liberation struggles, transitional justice, and the building of democratic institutions remains chronically under-documented (Mohmand and Loureiro 2017).

The overwhelming concentration of research on South Africa and sub-Saharan Africa, compared with North Africa, Central Africa, and the Horn of Africa, may obscure significant variations in democratic trajectories across the continent.

Future Research

The prevalence of descriptive studies that focus on describing events rather than explaining their causes constitutes the main intellectual limitation of this field. Future research should focus on a systematic causal analysis of democratic failures, drawing on comparative methods, natural experiments, and longitudinal data. The question is not whether Africa is democratic or not, but which specific institutional, historical, economic, and social configurations lead to the resilience or collapse of democracy.

Epistemological diversification: the field would benefit from more deliberately integrating African democratic theory into mainstream comparative analysis. This is not a plea for cultural exceptionalism, but for theoretical pluralism.

Geographical diversification: researchers should pay closer attention to Central and West Africa, where democratic turmoil has been most intense in recent years, and to North Africa, where the aftermath of the Arab Spring continues to provide significant comparative cases.

Methodological pluralism: bibliometric analysis provides an overview of the field. Future research should complement this with qualitative methods, ethnographic approaches, and analyses at sub-national and municipal levels where citizens have direct experience of democratic or non-democratic governance (Mohmand and Loureiro 2017).

The structural marginalisation of researchers based in Africa is not merely a bibliometric phenomenon; it reflects real inequalities in research

infrastructure, funding, and access to publication. Institutional support for African universities, open-access publishing, and the indexing of African journals in major databases would profoundly transform the knowledge landscape described in this study.

Conclusion

This article provides a comprehensive bibliometric mapping of academic research on democracy and democratisation in Africa, as indexed in the Scopus. Analysing 7,892 documents published between 1948 and 2024, the study identifies three major phases in the evolution of this field, highlights structural inequalities in knowledge production, and reveals significant thematic gaps, particularly regarding the treatment of military governance, digital authoritarianism, the role of women in democratisation, and the contributions of African theorists of democracy.

These findings have two main implications. Methodologically, they demonstrate the value of bibliometric tools in identifying the invisible structure of a research field: its dominant voices, its collaborative structures, and its silences. In substance, they argue for a field that evolves from description towards causal analysis, from a body of work centred on Northern countries towards a genuine pluralism of voices and perspectives, and from a focus on democratic procedure towards a concern for democratic substance as well as the material conditions and institutional realities that make meaningful popular participation possible or impossible.

The struggles for democracy in Africa are not an exception that can be explained by the failure of imported institutions. They rank among the major political phenomena of the contemporary world and deserve a field of study that does justice to their complexity.

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