

PUBLIC LEADERSHIP RESEARCH IN GLOBAL AND LOCAL GOVERNANCE: A SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW WITH BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

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Public leadership has become increasingly important in addressing complex governance challenges at both global and local levels. However, despite the rapid growth of the literature, a comprehensive understanding of its intellectual development and emerging research directions remains limited. This study examines publication trends, intellectual structure, collaboration patterns, and future research directions in public leadership research. A Systematic Literature Review combined with Bibliometric Analysis was conducted using 233 publications indexed in the Scopus database between 2016 and 2026. Descriptive bibliometric analysis was performed using the Scopus *Analyze Search Results* feature, while VOSviewer (version 1.6.20) was employed to analyze keyword co-occurrence, co-authorship, and bibliographic coupling networks. The findings reveal a substantial increase in research output over the past decade, with the Social Sciences representing the dominant subject area and the United States, China, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada emerging as the leading contributors. Bibliometric mapping indicates that collaborative governance, public value, digital transformation, sustainability, and climate governance constitute the core intellectual foundations of the field. Emerging topics, including artificial intelligence, smart governance, and ethical leadership, demonstrate the growing interdisciplinary nature of public leadership research, whereas empirical evidence from developing countries and comparative studies remains limited. This study contributes by providing a comprehensive synthesis of the evolution of public leadership research and offers a reference for future governance scholarship and evidence-informed public leadership practice.



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INTRODUCTION

Public leadership has become an increasingly important area of inquiry in response to the growing complexity of governance in the twenty-first century. Governments are expected to address multidimensional challenges, including rapid digital transformation, climate change, public health crises, demographic shifts, economic uncertainty, and increasing public demands for transparency, accountability, and citizen participation. These interconnected challenges have fundamentally altered the capacity required of public institutions and shifted expectations regarding the role of public leaders. Rather than relying solely on hierarchical authority and administrative control, public leaders are increasingly expected to facilitate collaboration, coordinate diverse stakeholders, encourage innovation, and generate public value across organizational and sectoral boundaries (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Bryson et al., 2014; Hartley, 2018; Osborne, 2010). Consequently, public leadership is no longer perceived merely as an administrative function but as a strategic governance capability that enables

governments to respond effectively to increasingly complex and dynamic policy environments.

The conceptual evolution of public leadership reflects broader transformations in public administration theory. Traditional Public Administration emphasized bureaucratic authority, legal-rational structures, and centralized decision-making, whereas the New Public Management paradigm shifted attention toward managerial efficiency, organizational performance, and market-oriented reforms. More recently, the emergence of New Public Governance has fundamentally redefined leadership as a collaborative and relational process involving governments, private organizations, civil society, and citizens in the co-production of public value (Osborne, 2010; Torfing et al., 2019). Within this perspective, leadership is understood not only as the capacity of individual leaders but also as the collective capability of governance systems to mobilize networks, build institutional trust, facilitate collaboration, and coordinate multiple actors in addressing complex public problems (Crosby et al., 2017; Denis et al., 2012; Hartley, 2018). This theoretical transition has considerably expanded the scope of public leadership by integrating perspectives from governance, organizational behavior, strategic management, sustainability, and digital transformation.

Recent empirical studies further demonstrate the expanding relevance of public leadership across diverse governance contexts. Contemporary public leaders are increasingly expected to navigate governance challenges associated with collaborative governance, digital government, artificial intelligence, climate adaptation, crisis management, organizational innovation, and sustainable development. Callahan and Mau (2024), for example, argue that public leadership should move beyond the traditional politics-administration dichotomy toward a multilateral governance model involving multiple institutional actors. Similarly, Sancino et al. (2025) emphasize the transition from bureaucratic managerialism to place-based public leadership, while Din et al. (2025) demonstrate the importance of collaborative governance in strengthening public service delivery. Other scholars highlight the growing significance of digital leadership, ethical governance, and artificial intelligence in enhancing government performance (Archana & Kamakshi Prasad, 2025; Bektı et al., 2026), whereas studies on climate governance underscore the role of adaptive leadership in promoting institutional resilience and sustainability (Hofstad & Vedeld, 2021; Vedeld & Hofstad, 2022). Collectively, these studies indicate that public leadership has become an interdisciplinary field that intersects with public administration, environmental governance, digital governance, organizational studies, and public policy.

Despite the increasing volume of research, the literature on public leadership remains fragmented. Existing studies tend to focus on specific governance issues, such as collaborative governance, crisis management, digital government, climate leadership, public value, or organizational innovation, resulting in diverse but disconnected streams of knowledge. Consequently, there is still limited understanding of how these various research themes collectively shape the intellectual development of public leadership. Furthermore, previous review studies have predominantly examined conceptual perspectives or specific governance contexts without providing a comprehensive synthesis of publication trends, thematic evolution, collaboration patterns, and intellectual structures across the broader field. As public leadership continues to evolve alongside rapid technological, institutional, and societal changes, the absence of an integrated overview constrains theoretical development and limits

the identification of emerging research priorities capable of informing future governance scholarship.

Another important limitation concerns the geographical and disciplinary fragmentation of existing knowledge. Much of the current literature originates from developed countries and is strongly embedded within public administration, while increasing contributions from developing countries, digital governance, environmental governance, healthcare governance, and sustainability studies have received comparatively limited attention in broader reviews. This imbalance restricts a comprehensive understanding of how public leadership adapts to different institutional, political, and socio-cultural contexts. Given the increasing complexity of governance challenges across both global and local settings, there is a growing need to integrate these diverse perspectives into a coherent body of knowledge capable of explaining the evolution, current state, and future trajectory of public leadership research.

Building upon these limitations, this study aims to provide a comprehensive synthesis of public leadership research within the contexts of global and local governance. Rather than concentrating on a single leadership perspective or governance issue, this study integrates the existing literature to identify the development of research, reveal dominant intellectual foundations, examine thematic evolution, and highlight emerging issues and remaining knowledge gaps. By consolidating fragmented research streams into a unified analytical perspective, this study contributes to strengthening theoretical understanding of public leadership while simultaneously providing a broader foundation for future interdisciplinary and comparative governance research.

Accordingly, this study addresses three research questions. First, how has public leadership research evolved in terms of publication trends and bibliometric characteristics? Second, what intellectual structures, thematic evolution, and collaboration patterns characterize the development of public leadership research? Third, what dominant research themes, emerging issues, research gaps, and future research directions can be identified from the existing body of literature? Answering these questions is expected to advance scholarly understanding of public leadership and provide valuable insights for researchers, policymakers, and public managers seeking to strengthen collaborative, adaptive, and sustainable governance in increasingly complex public sector environments.

METHOD

This study employed a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) combined with Bibliometric Analysis to examine the evolution of public leadership research in global and local governance. Integrating these approaches enables the systematic identification, organization, and synthesis of scientific knowledge while simultaneously mapping the intellectual structure, thematic evolution, and collaboration patterns within a research field (Donthu et al., 2021; Snyder, 2019; Zupic & Čater, 2015). The Scopus database was selected as the sole data source because of its extensive coverage of peer-reviewed journals, standardized bibliographic metadata, comprehensive citation indexing, and compatibility with bibliometric software, making it one of the most reliable databases for systematic reviews and bibliometric studies (Martín-Martín et al., 2018; Mongeon & Paul-Hus, 2016; Van Eck & Waltman, 2010). The literature search was conducted in the Title, Abstract, and Keywords (TITLE-ABS-KEY) fields by combining two conceptual domains. The first domain included *public leadership*, *public sector leadership*, *government leadership*, *leadership in public administration*, *leadership in government*, and *administrative leadership*, while the second domain comprised *governance*, *public governance*, *global governance*, *local governance*, *collaborative governance*, and *network*

governance. Boolean operator OR was used to combine synonymous keywords within each domain, whereas AND connected both domains. The search covered publications from 2016 to 2026 and yielded 233 documents, which constituted the dataset for subsequent analysis.

The bibliographic records were exported in CSV and RIS formats for analysis using complementary descriptive and network-based bibliometric techniques. Descriptive bibliometric analysis was performed using the Scopus Analyze Search Results feature to examine publication trends, document sources, productive authors, institutional affiliations, contributing countries, and subject area distributions (Donthu et al., 2021). Subsequently, VOSviewer version 1.6.20 was employed to visualize the intellectual structure of the field through keyword co-occurrence, co-authorship, and bibliographic coupling analyses (Kessler, 1963; Van Eck & Waltman, 2010; Zupic & Čater, 2015). The bibliometric findings were then synthesized narratively to interpret the evolution of public leadership research, identify dominant and emerging research themes, reveal knowledge gaps, and propose future research directions within the contexts of global and local governance.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

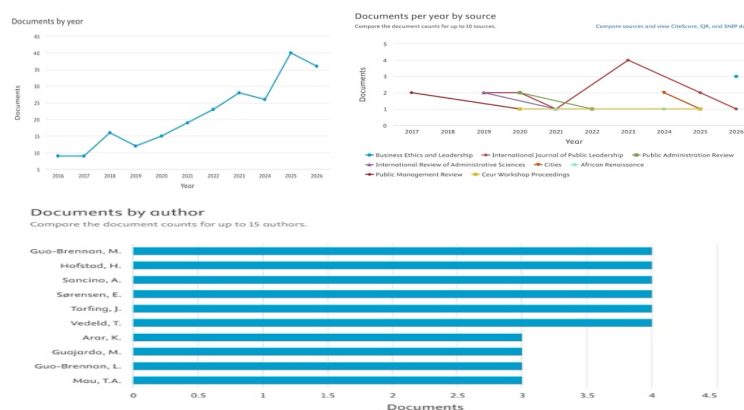
This section presents the findings of the bibliometric analysis conducted on 233 publications retrieved from the Scopus database. The results are organized according to the research objectives and research questions to provide a systematic understanding of the development of public leadership research in global and local governance. The analysis combines descriptive bibliometric indicators obtained from the Scopus Analyze Search Results feature with bibliometric mapping generated using VOSviewer. Together, these analyses provide insights into publication patterns, intellectual structures, collaboration networks, and thematic developments that characterize the current state of public leadership research.

Publication Trends and Bibliometric Characteristics

To address the first research question, "How has public leadership research in global and local governance evolved in terms of publication trends and bibliometric characteristics?", this section examines the bibliometric characteristics of the retrieved publications using the Scopus Analyze Search Results feature. The analysis focuses on publication trends over time, publication sources, subject area distribution, geographical distribution, and author productivity. These indicators provide an overview of the growth, disciplinary orientation, geographical concentration, and scholarly contributions that have shaped the development of public leadership research during the study period.

Figure 1.

Publication Trends and Bibliometric Characteristics of Public Leadership Research (2016–2026)



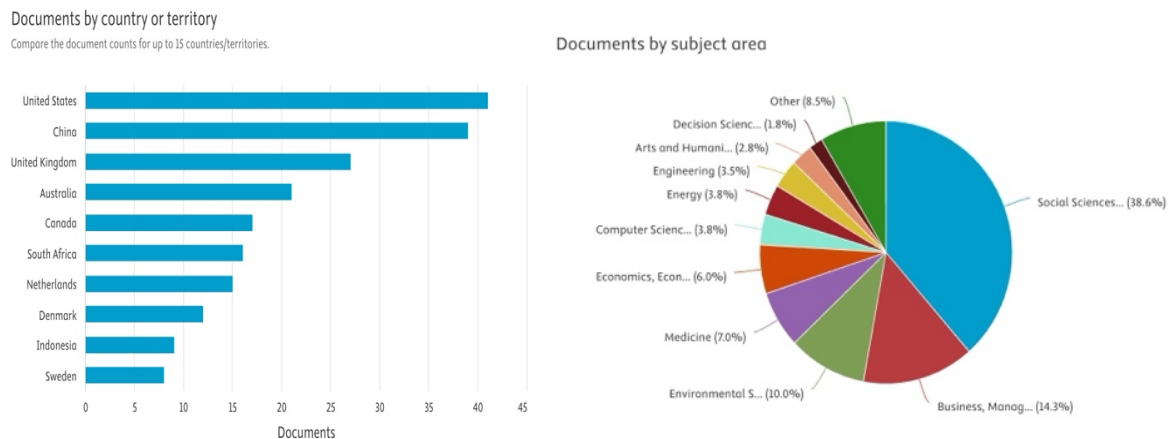
Source: Scopus Data, 2026

The Documents by Year analysis reveals a steady increase in publications on public leadership between 2016 and 2026, indicating growing scholarly interest in the field. Research output remained relatively stable during 2016–2017 before increasing gradually from 2018 onward and reaching its highest level in 2025 with more than 40 publications. Although a slight decline is observed in 2026, this pattern is likely attributable to the incomplete indexing of publications for the current year rather than a reduction in research activity. The upward publication trend reflects the increasing importance of public leadership in addressing contemporary governance challenges, including collaborative governance, digital transformation, sustainability, crisis management, and public sector innovation. This finding is consistent with previous studies that position public leadership as a central element of governance reform in increasingly complex and uncertain policy environments (Callahan & Mau, 2024; Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2026; Sancino et al., 2025). Likewise, the growing emphasis on artificial intelligence, climate governance, public health resilience, and smart government has further accelerated scholarly attention to public leadership (Archana & Kamakshi Prasad, 2025; Bektı et al., 2026; Vedeld & Hofstad, 2022). Collectively, these findings indicate that public leadership has evolved from a traditional administrative function into a strategic governance capability that supports collaborative, adaptive, and innovation-oriented public organizations, thereby reinforcing its significance for both theoretical advancement and evidence-based public sector practice.

The Documents by Source analysis indicates that publications on public leadership are distributed across diverse journals specializing in public administration, governance, leadership studies, public management, and public policy rather than being concentrated within a single publication outlet. This pattern demonstrates that public leadership has evolved into a multidisciplinary research domain integrating governance, collaborative management, digital transformation, sustainability, and public value creation. These findings suggest that public leadership has shifted from a bureaucratic perspective toward collaborative, adaptive, and network-oriented governance while expanding into digital government, public innovation, and smart governance (Andrews, 2019; Callahan & Mau, 2024; Guo-Brennan & Guo-Brennan, 2026; Ricard et al., 2017; Sancino et al., 2025; Saporito & Turrini, 2022). This development is consistent with the transition from Traditional Public Administration and New Public Management toward New Public Governance, where leadership is increasingly viewed as an integrative governance capability based on collaboration and co-creation (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Crosby et al., 2017; Hartley, 2018). Accordingly, future studies should continue promoting interdisciplinary approaches that strengthen governance innovation and collaborative leadership in addressing increasingly complex public challenges.

The Documents by Author analysis indicates that scholarly contributions are relatively balanced, with no single author dominating the field, as the most productive researchers contributed approximately four publications each. This balanced authorship pattern suggests that public leadership remains an expanding and intellectually diverse research domain supported by multiple theoretical perspectives and international collaboration. Previous studies similarly demonstrate that public leadership research increasingly encompasses collaborative governance, public value creation, digital transformation, climate leadership, and organizational innovation (Guo-Brennan et al., 2026; Jackson, 2019; Pedersen, 2022; Ricard et al., 2017; Sancino et al., 2025; Vallentin, 2024). The decentralized authorship structure indicates that knowledge development is driven by interdisciplinary collaboration rather than a single dominant theoretical tradition, creating opportunities for future comparative research and more comprehensive public leadership frameworks.

Figure 2.
Documents by Subject Area and Documents by Country/Territory



Source: Scopus Data, 2026

The Documents by Subject Area analysis shows that public leadership research is predominantly classified within the Social Sciences (41.6%), followed by Business, Management and Accounting, Environmental Science, Medicine, Economics, Computer Science, Engineering, and Arts and Humanities. This disciplinary distribution indicates that public leadership remains rooted in governance and public administration while increasingly integrating perspectives from strategic management, sustainability, digital transformation, and innovation. The findings support previous studies highlighting the transition from managerial efficiency toward collaborative governance, public value creation, and adaptive leadership (Andrews, 2019; Callahan & Mau, 2024; Saporito & Turrini, 2022). The growing contribution of environmental and technology-related disciplines further demonstrates that contemporary public leadership is closely associated with climate governance, artificial intelligence, healthcare resilience, and public sector digitalization (Archana & Kamakshi Prasad, 2025; Becti et al., 2026; Hofstad & Vedeld, 2021; Vedeld & Hofstad, 2022). Collectively, these findings reinforce the argument that public leadership has become a multidimensional governance capability integrating leadership, technology, sustainability, and organizational innovation (Bryson et al., 2014; Torfing et al., 2019; Van Wart et al., 2020).

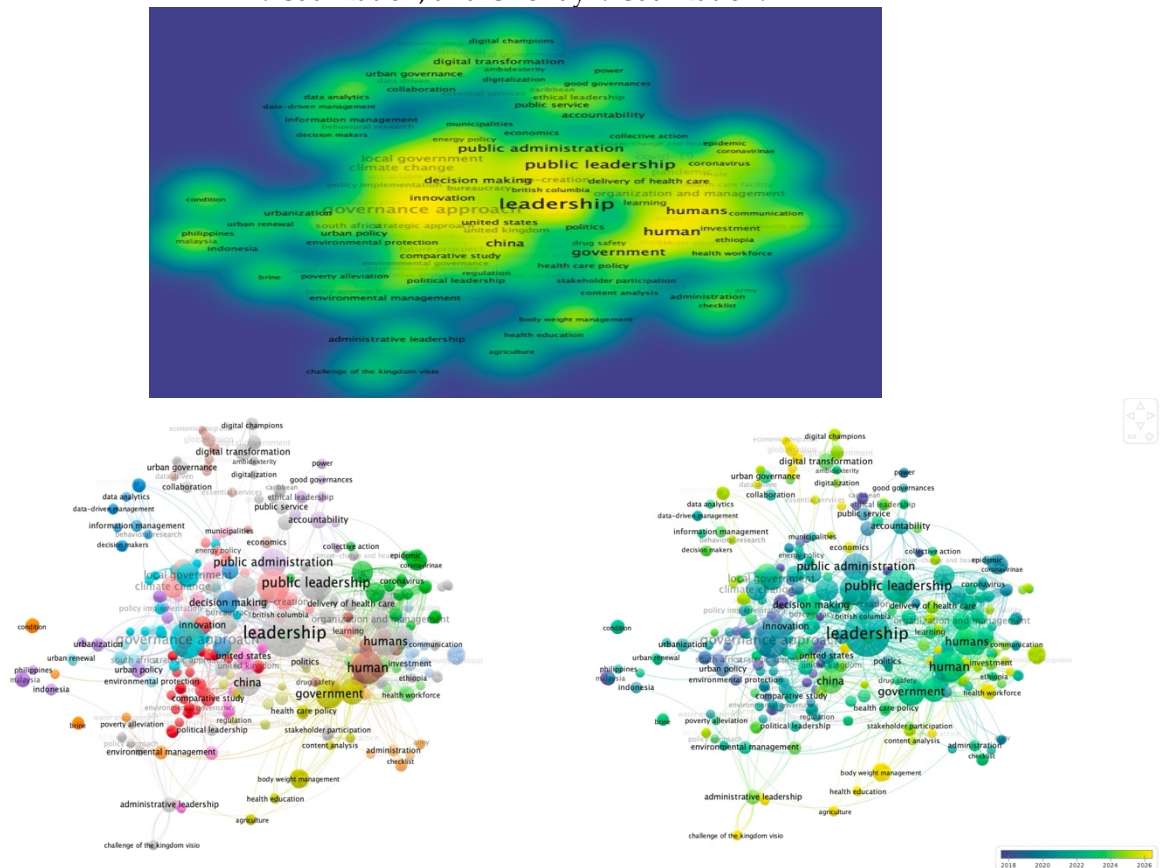
The Documents by Country/Territory analysis reveals that the United States, China, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada remain the leading contributors to public leadership research, while Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and several African countries demonstrate increasing publication productivity. This geographical pattern reflects differences in research capacity and institutional development but also confirms that public leadership has become a global governance agenda associated with decentralization, collaborative governance, digital government, and sustainable development (Becti et al., 2026; Din et al., 2025; Onyango, 2024; Santoso et al., 2024; Zumitzavan et al., 2024). Moreover, previous studies indicate that effective public leadership is strongly influenced by institutional context, governance arrangements, and collaborative capacity rather than universal administrative models (Hofstad & Torfing, 2025; Joyce, 2021; Vedeld & Hofstad, 2022). These findings broaden the understanding of public leadership beyond Western administrative traditions and underscore the importance of comparative and cross-national research in developing context-sensitive governance models.

Bibliometric Mapping of Public Leadership Research

To further address the second research question, bibliometric mapping was conducted to explore the intellectual structure and thematic evolution of public leadership research. Unlike

descriptive bibliometric indicators presented in the previous section, bibliometric mapping provides a deeper understanding of the relationships among research topics by identifying dominant themes, their interconnections, temporal evolution, and research intensity. This study employed keyword co-occurrence analysis, which was visualized through network, overlay, and density visualizations using VOSviewer. These complementary visualizations facilitate the identification of thematic clusters, emerging research topics, and the overall knowledge structure that has shaped the development of public leadership research over the last decade. The results of the bibliometric mapping are presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3.
Bibliometric Mapping of Public Leadership Research: Density Visualization, Network Visualization, and Overlay Visualization.



Source: Scopus Data, 2026

The keyword co-occurrence network identifies *leadership* and *public leadership* as the dominant nodes within the bibliometric map, exhibiting strong relationships with *public administration*, *governance*, *government*, *decision making*, *local government*, *accountability*, *public service*, *innovation*, *climate change*, and *sustainability*. This clustering pattern indicates that public leadership has evolved beyond a traditional administrative function into a multidisciplinary field integrating collaborative governance, organizational innovation, digital transformation, and sustainability. Similar empirical patterns are evident in recent studies emphasizing that contemporary public leadership increasingly operates through collaborative governance, adaptive institutions, and public value creation rather than hierarchical authority alone (Andrews, 2019; Callahan & Mau, 2024; Sancino et al., 2025; Saporito & Turrini, 2022). From a theoretical perspective, these findings reinforce the transition from Traditional Public Administration and New Public Management toward **New Public Governance**, where leadership is understood as a relational and collaborative process involving multiple actors across organizational boundaries (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Osborne,

2010; Torfing et al., 2019). Rather than contradicting earlier administrative theories, the bibliometric evidence extends them by demonstrating that contemporary public leadership increasingly functions as a governance capability for coordinating networks, facilitating institutional learning, and generating public value in complex policy environments.

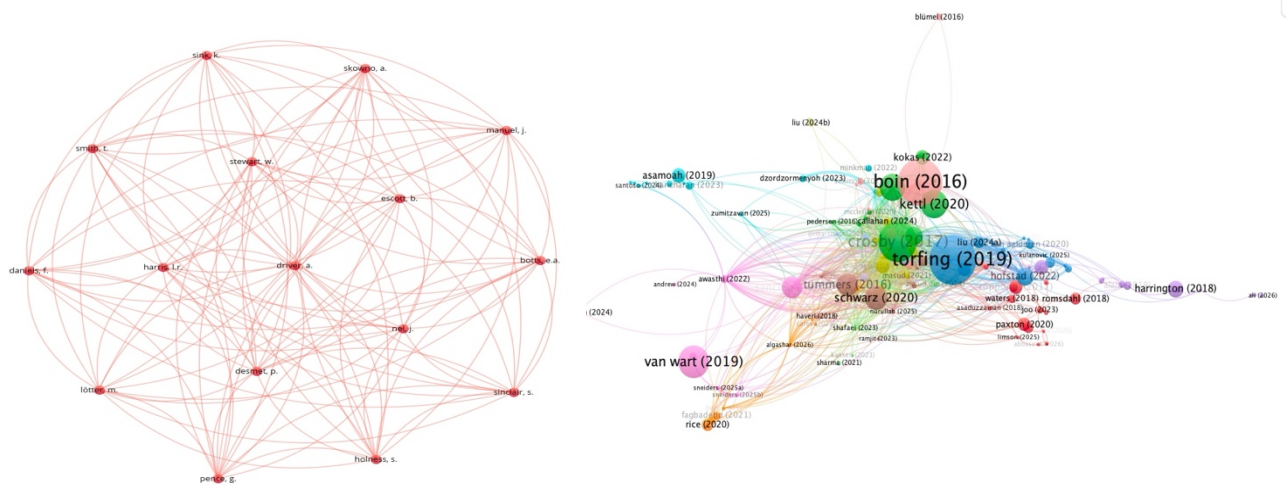
The overlay visualization demonstrates a clear temporal shift in public leadership research. Earlier studies focused primarily on *government*, *public administration*, *public service*, and *decision making*, whereas recent publications increasingly emphasize *digital transformation*, *accountability*, *sustainability*, *climate governance*, *artificial intelligence*, *innovation*, and *smart governance*. This evolution suggests that public leadership has moved from improving administrative performance toward strengthening adaptive governance and institutional resilience. The same trend is reflected in recent empirical studies addressing digital government, AI governance, climate leadership, and place-based public administration (Archana & Kamakshi Prasad, 2025; Bektı et al., 2026; Guo-Brennan et al., 2026; Hofstad & Vedeld, 2021; Sancino et al., 2025). Theoretically, these findings support the argument that public leadership is increasingly shaped by complexity, uncertainty, and interdependence, requiring leaders to mobilize collaboration rather than rely solely on bureaucratic authority (Bryson et al., 2014; Crosby et al., 2017; Hartley, 2018). Consequently, the bibliometric evidence reconstructs the traditional understanding of public leadership by positioning digital capability, sustainability, and collaborative governance as core dimensions of twenty-first-century public administration.

The density visualization indicates that *leadership*, *public leadership*, *public administration*, *governance*, *government*, and *humans* constitute the intellectual core of the field. In contrast, themes such as *digital transformation*, *climate governance*, *accountability*, *innovation*, and *local governance* appear with lower density despite showing increasing scholarly attention. This pattern suggests that governance and public administration remain the theoretical foundations of public leadership, while emerging themes gradually expand the boundaries of the discipline. Similar developments are reported by studies examining co-creation, collaborative leadership, public value, and governance innovation (Andrews, 2019; Callahan & Mau, 2024; Sørensen et al., 2021; Torfing et al., 2019). From a theoretical standpoint, the findings illustrate the ongoing reconstruction of public leadership theory from leader-centered models toward collaborative and network-oriented governance, where leadership is distributed across institutions and stakeholders rather than concentrated in individual actors (Crosby et al., 2017; Denis et al., 2012; Osborne, 2010). Therefore, the density map not only identifies established research domains but also highlights significant opportunities for future studies to integrate public leadership with artificial intelligence, climate resilience, digital government, and cross-sector collaboration, thereby advancing both governance theory and public sector practice.

Research Collaboration and Knowledge Development

While the previous section focused on the thematic structure and evolution of public leadership research, a comprehensive understanding of the field also requires an examination of its intellectual and collaborative foundations. Bibliometric mapping through co-authorship and bibliographic coupling enables the identification of scientific collaboration patterns and the intellectual structure underpinning knowledge development. Co-authorship analysis captures collaborative relationships among researchers, whereas bibliographic coupling identifies publications that share common references, thereby revealing major research streams and knowledge clusters. Collectively, these analyses provide complementary insights into the evolution of public leadership scholarship. The visualization results of both analyses are presented in Figure 4, which depicts the co-authorship network and the bibliographic coupling network of public leadership research.

Figure 4.
Co-authorship and Bibliographic Coupling Network of Public Leadership Research



Source: Scopus Data, 2026

Figure 4 illustrates the collaboration patterns among researchers through co-authorship analysis and the intellectual structure of the field through bibliographic coupling. Together, these analyses provide complementary insights into how scientific knowledge on public leadership has been produced, disseminated, and consolidated over time. While co-authorship analysis identifies collaborative relationships among researchers, bibliographic coupling reveals the intellectual foundations of the field by identifying publications that share common references and contribute to similar streams of knowledge.

The co-authorship network demonstrates that collaboration among public leadership scholars has become increasingly international and interdisciplinary. Rather than being dominated by a single research group, the network consists of interconnected collaborations among researchers from different institutions and countries, reflecting the increasingly complex nature of governance research. This pattern indicates that knowledge production in public leadership is no longer confined to traditional public administration but increasingly incorporates perspectives from leadership studies, sustainability, digital governance, organizational behavior, climate policy, and public health. Similar developments have been reported in recent empirical studies emphasizing collaborative governance, public value creation, and cross-sector leadership as essential components of contemporary public administration (Andrews, 2019; Schwarz et al., 2020; Sørensen et al., 2021; Torfing et al., 2019). From a theoretical perspective, this finding supports the argument that leadership in the public sector has evolved from an organization-centered activity into a collaborative governance capability that depends on interorganizational networks and collective action (Crosby et al., 2017; Osborne, 2010).

The bibliographic coupling network reveals the intellectual structure underpinning contemporary public leadership research. The largest nodes are represented by highly influential publications, including Boin et al. (2016), Crosby et al. (2021), Kettl (2020), Torfing et al. (2019), Tummers and Knies (2016), and Van Wart et al. (2019), indicating that these studies share substantial references with subsequent publications and therefore constitute the principal knowledge base of the field. Unlike citation analysis, which primarily reflects historical scholarly influence, bibliographic coupling identifies publications that are conceptually related through shared reference lists, making it particularly suitable for identifying contemporary research streams (Kessler, 1963; Zupic & Čater, 2015). The prominence of these studies demonstrates that current public leadership scholarship increasingly emphasizes collaborative governance, public value creation, crisis leadership,

digital leadership, and co-creation rather than conventional bureaucratic leadership approaches.

These findings also suggest a significant reconstruction of public leadership theory. Earlier perspectives generally conceptualized public leadership as an administrative function emphasizing authority, managerial control, and organizational performance. However, the present bibliometric evidence indicates that contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualizes public leadership as a relational governance capability operating through collaboration, institutional adaptation, network governance, and public value creation. This evolution is consistent with the theoretical transition from Traditional Public Administration and New Public Management toward New Public Governance, where leadership is understood as a distributed process involving governments, private organizations, civil society, and citizens in solving complex public problems (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Crosby et al., 2017; Osborne, 2010). Accordingly, public leadership should be viewed not merely as the capability of individual leaders but as the collective capacity of governance systems to mobilize collaborative action, coordinate multiple stakeholders, and generate sustainable public value.

Finally, the bibliographic coupling map also reveals several emerging research opportunities. Although recent publications increasingly address digital transformation, artificial intelligence, climate governance, ethical leadership, and collaborative innovation, these topics remain located at the periphery of the intellectual network, suggesting that they have not yet become dominant theoretical streams. This observation indicates that future research should move beyond evaluating leadership effectiveness at the organizational level toward developing integrative governance frameworks that combine digital leadership, sustainability, ethical governance, and collaborative public value creation. Such a direction would contribute not only to strengthening the theoretical maturity of public leadership but also to enhancing its practical relevance for addressing increasingly complex governance challenges at both global and local levels (Andrews, 2019; Guo-Brennan et al., 2026; Sancino et al., 2025).

Research Synthesis and Contributions to Public Leadership Research

The synthesis of the reviewed literature demonstrates that public leadership research has evolved from a traditional emphasis on administrative authority toward a broader governance perspective characterized by collaboration, adaptability, and public value creation. Across the analyzed studies, the dominant research themes include collaborative governance, public service leadership, public value, crisis leadership, digital government, sustainability, climate governance, and organizational innovation. These findings indicate that public leadership is increasingly recognized as a strategic governance capability for coordinating multiple stakeholders, strengthening institutional resilience, and addressing complex public policy challenges across global and local governance contexts (Andrews, 2019; Callahan & Mau, 2024; Sancino et al., 2025; Saporito & Turrini, 2022). This evolution reflects the convergence of public administration, governance, leadership studies, and organizational management, reinforcing the argument that public leadership should be understood as an integrative and multidisciplinary governance concept rather than merely an administrative function.

The literature further reveals several emerging issues that are reshaping the field, particularly digital leadership, artificial intelligence, ethical governance, smart government, climate resilience, public health governance, and cross-sector collaboration. These developments demonstrate that contemporary public leaders are increasingly required to operate in complex governance environments characterized by technological disruption, environmental uncertainty, and growing demands for transparency, participation, and accountability (Archana & Kamakshi Prasad, 2025; Bektı et al., 2026; Guo-Brennan et al., 2026; Hofstad & Vedeld, 2021). Nevertheless, the review also identifies important research gaps.

Existing studies remain concentrated in developed countries and are largely dominated by qualitative and conceptual approaches, while comparative, longitudinal, mixed-method, and cross-country investigations remain limited. In addition, although digital transformation, artificial intelligence, and sustainability have emerged as prominent topics, limited attention has been devoted to examining how these issues interact simultaneously within public leadership and governance processes.

This study contributes to public leadership scholarship by integrating a Systematic Literature Review with Bibliometric Analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of the field's intellectual structure, thematic evolution, collaboration patterns, and knowledge development. Unlike previous reviews that focus on specific governance contexts, this study synthesizes descriptive bibliometric evidence and network visualization into a unified analytical framework, thereby extending theoretical discussions on New Public Governance, collaborative governance, and public value creation (Ansell & Gash, 2008; Crosby et al., 2017; Osborne, 2010; Torfing et al., 2019). The findings also demonstrate that public leadership is progressively shifting toward a collaborative, adaptive, and value-oriented governance paradigm that integrates technological innovation, sustainability, and stakeholder collaboration. From a practical perspective, these results provide evidence-based insights for policymakers and public managers in designing more adaptive and inclusive leadership strategies, while offering a strategic foundation for future research to develop integrated governance frameworks that connect public leadership with digital transformation, artificial intelligence, climate adaptation, and sustainable development across diverse institutional and governance contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the evolution of public leadership research in global and local governance through a Systematic Literature Review with Bibliometric Analysis of 233 Scopus-indexed publications published between 2016 and 2026. The findings demonstrate a substantial increase in scholarly attention, indicating that public leadership has evolved into a multidisciplinary field extending beyond traditional public administration to encompass collaborative governance, public value, digital transformation, sustainability, climate governance, and organizational innovation. Bibliometric mapping further reveals a transition from hierarchical administrative leadership toward adaptive, collaborative, and value-oriented governance, while emerging themes such as artificial intelligence, smart governance, and ethical leadership reflect the expanding scope of contemporary public leadership research. Despite this development, the literature remains characterized by limited empirical evidence from developing countries, a predominance of qualitative and conceptual studies, and insufficient comparative and longitudinal research. By integrating descriptive bibliometric analysis with bibliometric network mapping, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the intellectual structure, thematic evolution, and knowledge development of public leadership research. These findings contribute to advancing public leadership theory while offering evidence-based insights for policymakers and researchers to strengthen adaptive, collaborative, and sustainable governance and to guide future interdisciplinary and comparative research.

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