

## Editorial: When All Speak but Few Listen—Asymmetries in Political Conversation

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### Abstract

This thematic issue looks at political conversation with a focus on political listening and seeks to advance an empirical approach to listening. Listening here means not just media exposure or co-presence in conversation, but as Benjamin Barber (2003, p. 175) argues in his book *Strong Democracy*, it means “I will put myself in his place, I will try to understand, I will strain to hear what makes us alike, I will listen for a common rhetoric evocative of a common purpose or a common good.”

### Keywords

being heard; communicative rationality; deliberation; listening; political conversation; political listening

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## 1. Introduction

The political communication literature has been concerned with political conversations for decades (Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). This regard has highlighted the importance of conversation as a source of news consumption (Levy, 1983), political knowledge (Eveland, 2004), political participation (Kim et al., 1999), and a proto-public sphere that allows for identity formation, argument elaboration, and uncertainty reduction (Gastil & Dillard, 1999). Conversation has been heralded as a cure for intolerance (Mutz, 2002), a fundamental part of deliberative processes (Fishkin, 1997), a prejudice reductor (Amsalem et al., 2021; Pettigrew et al., 2011), and a predictor of more equitable distribution of resources (Sulkin & Simon, 2001).

However, simultaneously, political conversations have been associated with communication breakdown (Wells et al., 2017), the reinforcement of political priors, and the creation of echo chambers (Sunstein,

2007) that result in increased extremity and polarization (Hutchens et al., 2019; Mansbridge, 1983; Suk et al., 2022).

The digital environment was heralded as an era of public speaking. Armed with low-cost tools, “anyone” had a public they could connect with, making a networked public sphere possible. Trusting that the marketplace of ideas metaphor would hold and that good ideas would rise to the top, Jimi Hendrix’s famous quote, “knowledge speaks but wisdom listens” would finally be possible at a global scale. With the rise of this new communication ecology, the flourishing of deliberative democracy was anticipated by many worldwide. Instead, and only a few years later, democracy has begun to backslide in new and stable democracies alike. Affective polarization and populism are on the rise in many parts of the globe, and the compromises needed to confront global challenges seem more complex and more demanding to reach.

Most of our scholarly attention has been captured by the possibilities of speech that digital communication technologies afford. This point is nicely illustrated by the emergence of a sender effects logic that it is not what receiving information does to us, but instead what happens to us because we express ourselves in the public domain (Pingree, 2007). However, as we focus on expression, we overlook the dialogic nature of communication.

Byung-Chul Han (2022) has argued, and we agree, that today’s democratic crisis is a crisis of listening. A crisis in which society disintegrates into identities that, by not listening to others, cannot democratically engage with them:

Listening is a political act insofar as it is what brings people together as a community in the first place and makes discourse possible. It founds a we. A democracy is a community of listeners. Digital communication—that is, communication without community—destroys the politics of listening. (Han, 2022, p. 20).

Deliberative theorists, including Susan Bickford (1996), Andrew Dobson (2014), and Mary Scudder (2020), have highlighted listening as one potential avenue for enhanced deliberation. However, how do we scale up deliberation to a societal level? How do we infuse everyday political conversations with a listening disposition that helps us solve collective problems?

In this thematic issue we hope to contribute to answering these questions through the advancement of academic reflections on political listening with a set of articles that: (a) highlight the importance of being heard for future political conversations; (b) stress the importance of contextual mediating factors for the benefits of listening to materialize; and (c) propose methods to assess listening occurring in natural settings and also help evaluate the ability of AI tools that seek to extend deliberation to mass society.

## 2. On the Importance of Being Heard

Itzhakov et al. (2025) engage experimentally with the issues of reduced interaction and increased polarization that may come from having political conversations with those who do not share our political leanings. Employing different techniques, including priming a high-quality listening conversation from our past, imagining a high-quality listening conversation, or watching a conversation modeling high-quality

listening, participants under high-quality listening report higher levels of openness to opposing views and a mostly indirect effect on willingness to engage in future interactions with those who hold opposing views.

Shaughnessy et al. (2025) experimentally manipulate being heard using elaboration questions as part of a modeled conversation. These questions probed the more passive actor in the conversational dyad to provide their thoughts about the issues of homelessness and abortion being discussed. The presence of elaboration questions increased both the feeling of being heard and subsequently the likelihood of engaging in future discussions, regardless of the participants' position on the issue.

### 3. On Moderating and Contextual Factors

Scherman et al. (2025), examining Habermas' distinction between strategic and understanding orientations towards communication, find that traditional and social media use are more related to a strategic orientation towards conversation than to an understanding orientation. However, among those with higher levels of exposure to news, an understanding orientation is fostered, particularly when they are also incidentally exposed to news. This pattern may be related to Suh et al.'s (2025) exploration of partisan media consumption.

Suh et al. (2025) employ panel designs across two elections in the United States to show how the use of partisan media leads to a preference for uncompromising politicians, particularly among right-leaning media users. A closedness mediates this preference for differing perspectives, that is, an unwillingness to listen. Their results suggest a causal flow from partisan media use, which reduces exposure to differing perspectives, thereby bolstering the fortunes of uncompromising politicians and potentially jeopardizing the functioning of democratic systems.

Mazorra-Correa and Monard (2025) demonstrate that engaging in political talk and listening with like-minded individuals leads to increased political participation. Furthermore, under conditions of enhanced listening, cross-cutting conversations also result in increased political participation. These results suggest that without a listening component, conversations across lines of difference might not unleash their civic potential. It would be through enhanced listening that conversations become the soul of democracy.

### 4. On New Methods to Assess Listening

Choucair (2025) embraces the complexity of understanding listening across a hybrid media system in which individuals have diverse platforms where they can listen or be listened to. Building on the dimensions of attentiveness, openness, and responsiveness, the author proposes how to assess listening in a multi-channel, multi-platform conversation ecosystem.

Grancea and Țuțui (2025) develop an assessment tool they named "listening incentive score" to help evaluate the ability of AI tools that seek to extend deliberation processes to mass audiences. The underlying problem being tackled is how to ensure that effective listening practices scale up as deliberation transitions from small groups to a mass society, leveraging AI. Going beyond responsive listening, that is, the system's capacity to answer questions "honestly," the authors argue for apophatic listening or a joint search for common ground

and common meaning. Models evaluated do not perform very well on listening capabilities, yet the authors propose a series of recommendations to improve listening in such systems.

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### Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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