

# US National Public Radio (NPR): Commentary Dominated by White Men, Rarely Touches Directly on Political Issues

Some Things Considered, Mostly by White Men

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*A new FAIR study finds that NPR's regular commentary is dominated by white men, predominantly addresses arts and culture, and almost never touches directly on political issues.*

This study reviewed transcripts from January 1 to May 31, 2015, looking at regular commentators—that is, voices who were featured twice or more on Morning Edition, All Things Considered, Weekend Edition Saturday and Weekend Edition Sunday to present their opinions in monologue form.

The study found 25 regular commentators, whose viewpoints were featured in a total of 232 segments. Of these commentators, 21 were men and four were women (84 percent male); 23 of the commentators (92 percent) were non-Latino whites. The two people of color who were regular commentators were Eric Deggans, an African-American writer who critiques TV, and Betto Arcos, a native of Mexico who covers music culture. No women of color were regular commentators.



Betto Arcos, one of two people of color who are regular commentators on NPR's main news programs. (photo: PRI)

Women provided only 9 percent of segments by regular commentators aired during the

study period; 9 percent were by people of color.

FAIR has studied NPR's commentators twice before, in conjunction with broader studies of NPR's sources in 1991 (Extra!, [4-5/93](#)) and 2003 (Extra!, [5-6/04](#)). Both these earlier studies looked at four months of commentary, rather than five; the 1991 study looked only at the weekday news shows, not at the Weekend Edition programs.

The total number of regular commentators in 2015 (25) is markedly lower than in 2003 (46) and slightly less than in 1993 (27), despite the earliest study excluding weekend programming.

The 16 percent of regular commentators who were female in 2015 was lower than the 24 percent women in 2003, and only one percentage more than the 7 percent women in 1991. Likewise, the 8 percent of regular commentators who were people of color in 2015 is a big step back from 2003, when 20 percent were non-white or Latino. The latest study was up from the low point of 1991, when just one of NPR's regular commentators—or 4 percent—was a person of color.

White men were 84 percent of NPR's regular commentators in 2015, up from 2003's 60 percent, and practically the same as 1993's 85 percent.



The BBC's Jonny Dymond, the only person we found doing individual political commentary on NPR News. (image: BBC)

Other commentators focused on particular subject areas, like history (Nate Dimeo), linguistics (Geoffrey Nunberg), astronomy (Adam Frank), sports (Frank Deford) or cooking (Bonny Wolf). Greg O'Brien did a series of commentaries talking about his personal experience with Alzheimer syndrome. Most of NPR's regular commentators in 2015 can be described as critics or reviewers, evaluating cultural products in the fields of film, TV, literature or music. Along with a couple of other contributors who looked at arts more broadly, like rock historian Ed Ward, 72 percent of regular commentators focused on these cultural topics.

The only regular commentator who specialized in politics was BBC Washington correspondent Jonny Dymond, who delivered colorful accounts of British electoral campaigns. His focus was on rhetorical styles and personal quirks (like favorite sports teams), however, rather than on actual political issues.

This is a big change from the previous studies, which found politics to be a frequent theme of NPR commentary. In 1991, regular commentators produced 29 segments on international

affairs, 21 commentaries on US politics and seven on economics. (Dymond's five segments of on British politics were the only comparable commentaries.)

The 2003 study recorded subject areas by percentage, not raw numbers; 18 percent of the segments by regular commentators focused on domestic politics, while 4 percent looked at international affairs. Only 9 percent focused on the arts.



E.J. Dionne's point/counterpoint segments with David Brooks have replaced virtually all political commentary on NPR News. (photo: Amherst)

The regular Week in Politics pundits are Washington Post columnist E.J. Dionne, representing liberals, and New York Times columnist (and PBS commentator) David Brooks taking the conservative side. Both are white men. The political discussion that used to be incorporated into NPR's commentary is now relegated to Week in Politics, a feature on All Things Considered that usually airs on Friday. Rather than having a range of commentators giving their individual perspectives in monologues throughout the week, Week in Politics presents two commentators who represent a conservative and liberal viewpoint discussing trending topics in a point/counterpoint format.

Occasionally Brooks or Dionne takes the week off, and a stand-in takes their place. Suzy Khimm, a senior editor at the New Republic, filled in for Dionne twice in the study period. Ramesh Ponnuru, an Indian-American man and senior editor at the National Review, filled in for Brooks six times, while Reihan Salam, National Review's executive director, filled in for Brooks twice. All three of the replacement pundits are Asian-American. As Khimm's two appearances were the only female representation, Week in Politics' punditry was 97 percent male and 83 percent white.

The virtual elimination of political commentary from most of NPR's main news shows comes after decades of [criticism](#) from [Republicans](#) and conservative news commentators who considered NPR to be unworthy of taxpayer support, in part because it failed to include enough conservative voices. (In actuality, back when there was enough political commentary on NPR to evaluate its political slant, FAIR argued that it leaned to the right—see Extra!, [5-6/04](#).)

In May 2014, the board of directors of NPR adopted a [new strategic plan](#) that aimed, among other things, for “undisputed leadership” in “stories at the intersection of race, ethnicity and culture,” and a newsroom that better “reflect[s] the fabric of America,” within three to five years. With regular commentators who are 84 percent male and 92 percent white, NPR has its work cut out for it.

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