

Dismantling the Power of Incumbency

Overcoming Roadblocks to Women's Political Leadership



As I work across the United States through the ReflectUS State Network, I consistently see the challenges that incumbency presents for accelerating women's political leadership. If our nation's leaders are ever going to reflect the populace, we must address the disadvantages women face in a system that protects the status quo.

– Amanda Pohl, Programs Director, ReflectUS

The research is clear – if a representative democracy is the goal, there must be changes to the structures that create safe havens for politicians who have been in power for years without any chance of competition. Systems that protect incumbents significantly limit opportunities for new people and fresh ideas. In a country that values innovation, we should demand better.

– Cynthia Richie Terrell, CEO, RepresentWomen

Introduction

One of the challenges often noted to women's political leadership is the role of incumbency and its power to influence elections. Incumbency is a phenomenon that has been investigated by political researchers since at least the 1970s, and has existed in the U.S. political system since the nineteenth century. It has been observed that incumbents within democracies receive significant advantages over electoral challengers.¹ In fact, an average of 90 percent of incumbents can expect reelection even in instances of low constituent approval or in cases where party loyalty votes have disadvantaged their districts.² In Congressional elections, incumbents are considered “safe” in more than 80 percent of districts, creating more difficulty for women – who are often first-time candidates – to make gains.³ In this brief, ReflectUS analyzes incumbency more closely and how this phenomenon affects women seeking political office.

Benefits of Incumbency

Incumbent Protection

Political party systems in the United States are largely designed to protect the power structure of the party. Committee assignments, for instance, are often awarded to those who bring in the most money and, therefore, have the most seeming benefit to the party structure.⁴ Men have always

¹ See Carson, J. L., Sievert, J., and Williamson, R. D., Nationalization and the Incumbency Advantage, Political Research Quarterly, 73(1), 2020.

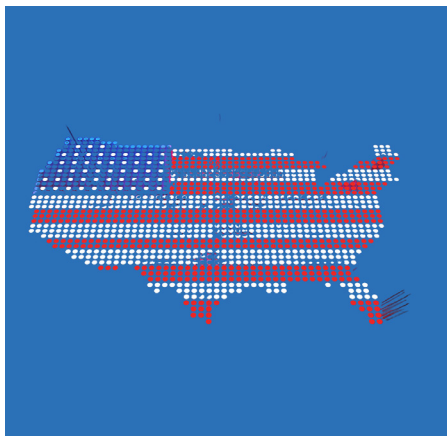
² See Ibid (Carson, Sievert, & Williamson).

³ See RepresentWomen, “In Ranked Choice Elections, Women WIN” (2020). <https://fairvote.app.box.com/s/338st-va0z3urud062ym5kt8r44927oze>

⁴ See Hesberlig, E. S., Congressional Parties, Fundraising, and Committee Ambition, Political Research Quarterly, 56(2), 2003.

held a significant majority of seats in state legislatures and Congress.^{5, 6} In fact, more than three-quarters of Congressional members are men. As a result of their long-standing position, men are overwhelmingly assigned to the more consequential committees. In order to be re-elected, politicians use these coveted leadership positions to raise their political profile, which brings in more money to their campaigns and the party and consequently keeps them in power.⁷ Hence, a cycle of male political dominance emerges. Moreover, elected officials at the state and federal level pay dues to their party's caucus, whose leaders are responsible for committee assignment decisions. Similar to the federal level, the caucus dues structure ultimately benefits those who have held power the longest – men – with a few limited, notable exceptions.

Consequently, the fundraising and election cycles housed within party structures prioritize incumbent protection, and as a result, prioritize men. The combination of these circumstances make it difficult for women to break through a political system designed to protect the super majority of men currently in power, regardless of political party.



As highlighted, although incumbency is a strong predictor for re-election, there have been successful primary challenges by women to male incumbents in recent years. In fact, two Congressional women defeated powerful male incumbents in recent primaries.⁸ While this should have been heralded as a victory for representative democracy, their political party saw it as a threat and changed policies to discourage contractors from working with future challengers to incumbents.⁹ When women are openly dissuaded from running for office, suggestively told to “wait their turn”, or unable to hire political firms due to party threats, women are not only shut out of the process, but the tenets of a representative democracy are undermined.

As noted, due to fundraising, seniority, and incumbency advantage, political parties have a vested interest in protecting incumbents and ensuring they remain in their seats. Finally, incumbents have name recognition, vast political networks, and cultivated donor lists. Incumbents are also well-versed on the requirements of campaigning. Therefore, incumbents require less support from political parties, allowing parties' support, finances, and staff to be redirected toward open seats and competitive districts.

Fundraising and Incumbency

Consider a report released by OpenSecrets on incumbent funding and challenger funding for the 2020 election cycle. Incumbent Senate candidates raised an average of \$28,649,593 compared to Senate challengers' average of \$5,264,022. This deep disparity in funds raised is reflected in the results

5 See Center for American Women and Politics, “Women in State Legislatures” (2021). <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/women-state-legislature-2021>

6 See Center for American Women and Politics, “Historical Summary of Women in Statewide Elective Executive Office: 1969-Current” (2021). <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/historical-summary-women-statewide-elective-executive-office-1969-current>

7 See ReflectUS, “Ensuring Success: What Happens When Women Win” (2021). <https://reflect.us/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Ensuring-Success.pdf>

8 See Mike Lillis, “Dems seek to stifle primary challenges to incumbents” (The Hill) March 22, 2019. <https://thehill.com/homenews/campaign/435332-dems-seek-to-stifle-primary-challenges-to-incumbents>

9 See Ibid (Lillis).

of those races – 26 incumbents were reelected and only five incumbents were defeated.¹⁰ The House of Representatives races had similar outcomes: incumbents raised an average of \$2,725,130 and won 372 races while challengers raised an average of \$417,796 and defeated only 15 incumbents.¹¹

While fundraising is difficult for challengers in a general election, there are additional post-election complications for those challengers who may win a primary election. If a woman enters her caucus after a contentious primary, for instance, defeating a key fundraiser for the party, she often begins her term at a significant disadvantage – not only must she face the pressures of being a newly elected woman, but she has also potentially impacted the party’s fundraising potential, alienating would-be allies. Additionally, if a woman defeats an incumbent man in a district that is seen as competitive by the other party, the party in power has to spend more money to maintain that seat after losing the incumbency advantage.



Additionally, running a campaign as a woman costs more money than running as a man. ReflectUS Coalition member [RepresentWomen](#) found that women who won as challengers and in open seats required significantly more money to win races than their male counterparts, further accentuating the divide between incumbents and challengers.¹²

Women and Men Incumbent Differences

Women who run for re-election generally have a similar profile as their male counterparts – a political network, name recognition, a voting record, political party infrastructure support, and financial backing. In fact, successful candidates running for re-election have been fundraising throughout their time in office in addition to the campaign season. Yet, the number of women political incumbents is woefully below that of men. Women currently hold only 26.7 percent of Congressional seats, 30.3 percent of statewide elected official seats, 31 percent of state legislature seats, and 25.1 percent of city mayoral seats with populations over 30,000 people.¹³

Moreover, even when women are incumbents, many of the benefits men incumbents experience do not occur for them. Specifically, according to a recent report, women must clearly demonstrate their leadership and likeability in ways men incumbents do not.¹⁴ Women incumbents also still face challenges proving their credibility and qualifications that their men counterparts do not. Research shows that voters do not readily assume that women are performing their job in political office.¹⁵

10 See OpenSecrets, “Incumbent Advantage” (2021). <https://www.opensecrets.org/elections-overview/incumbent-advantage>

11 See Ibid (OpenSecrets, Incumbent).

12 See RepresentWomen, “PACs and Donors: Agents of Change for Women’s Representation” (2020). https://www.representwomen.org/research_pacs_donors

13 See Center for American Women in Politics, “Current Numbers” (2021). <https://cawp.rutgers.edu/current-numbers>

14 See Barbara Lee Family Foundation, “Staying Power: Strategies for Women Incumbents” (2021). <https://www.barbaraleefoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/Staying-Power-Final.pdf>

15 See Ibid (Barbara Lee Family Foundation).

Women are expected to prove what they have accomplished, what they are actively working on for the community, and what they will prioritize if reelected.¹⁶

Interventions to Address the Power of Incumbency

Recruitment Targets

The United States has no requirement for political parties to nominate a certain number of women candidates, nor any requirements for gender parity in elected office.¹⁷ With a disproportionate number of male incumbents in office without term limits, there are limited opportunities for open-seat contests in which women candidates can run and win. Additionally, with many single-member Congressional districts throughout the country, it is an added difficulty for women candidates to secure a seat.¹⁸

Yet, there have been innovative ideas presented that stress competition and continued striving for excellence. For example, political parties could implement recruitment targets for women candidates at the primary stage and during open-seat races. Taking this step would not only advance gender representation within government campaigns at all levels, but also ensure continued recruitment of women political leaders.¹⁹ It is important to continue devising strategies to increase the number of elected women.

Fund Women Running At All Levels of Government

Research shows voters will elect an unlikeable man regardless of qualification, but will not support a qualified woman perceived as unlikable.²⁰ Donating to women increases the visibility of women's campaigns, which also helps candidates communicate their agenda and likeability with voters. Donors should be encouraged to show financial support of women to account for the higher cost of running, especially women who are challenging men in open seats.²¹ Since women are underfunded by PACs,²² it is imperative to increase the pool of women donors to help support women running for open seats. Currently, women are less likely to donate and those who do, donate less than men.²³ Increasing donations to these candidates also increases the chances of PACs noticing, and ultimately



16 See Ibid (Barbara Lee Family Foundation).

17 More than 80 countries have adopted some form of gender quotas, whether mandatory or voluntary, including five of the largest eight industrial nations, France, Italy, Germany, United Kingdom, and Canada, and other democracies including Australia, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, New Zealand, among others. See <https://www.idea.int/data-tools/data/gender-quotas/country-overview> for more information.

18 See Sanbonmatsu, K., Women's Underrepresentation in the U.S. Congress, *Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 149(1), 2020. <https://www.amacad.org/publication/womens-underrepresentation-us-congress>

19 See Saskia Brechenmacher, "Tackling Women's Underrepresentation in U.S. Politics: Comparative Perspectives from Europe" (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace) February 20, 2018. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/02/20/tackling-women-s-underrepresentation-in-u.s.-politics-comparative-perspectives-from-europe-pub-75315>

20 See Amelia Thomson-DeVeaux, "Americans Say They Would Vote For a Woman, But..." (FiveThirtyEight) July 15, 2019. <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/americans-say-they-would-vote-for-a-woman-but/>

21 See Ibid (RepresentWomen, PACs).

22 See Ibid (RepresentWomen, PACs).

23 See Ibid (RepresentWomen, PACs).

financially contributing to women’s campaigns in lesser known races. Historically, PACs have overfunded incumbents.²⁴ Additionally, studies have shown that small-dollar, public, donation-matching programs have the potential to minimize the financial disadvantages placed on women candidates.²⁵ Supporters of the small-dollar donation-matching program note that this would also encourage candidates to spend more time with constituents and support women and, especially women of color, who benefit the most from small-dollar donations.²⁶



Support Women in Open Seats

In order for women to feel supported in running for major elected positions, there must be reform in the campaign process. Research describes several ways to support women’s representation in elected politics: (1) intentionally recruiting women of color and candidates outside of traditional networks, (2) reducing the role of big money in elections, (3) improving wages for public service professionals, (4) improving work-family policies, (5) allowing the use of campaign funds for dependent care expenses, and (6) fostering a culture of equity and respect on the campaign trail.²⁷ If more women run for open seats, it is very probable that adjustments will be made to account for the reality of many women who are often also working as caregivers to children and other family members.

After redistricting in 2021 and 2022, there will be newly drawn districts with open seats. Some states are gaining Congressional representatives and others are losing representatives. Additionally, state legislative lines will be redrawn. This is a prime opportunity to support women in the most competitive districts and recruit women for all open seats. Additionally, political parties should commit to recruiting women to run for winnable seats and signal support to PAC and individual donors. Since women running inspires more women to run,²⁸ it is important to have as many women as possible run when redistricting occurs and seats are open or when incumbents may be at a disadvantage.

24 See Ibid (RepresentWomen, PACs).

25 See Brennan Center for Justice, “Small Donor Public Financing Could Advance Race and Gender Equity in Congress” (2020). <https://www.brennancenter.org/our-work/research-reports/small-donor-public-financing-could-advance-race-and-gender-equity>

26 See Ibid (Brennan Center for Justice).

27 See the American Center for Progress, “The State of Women’s Leadership - And How To Continue Changing the Face of U.S. Politics” (2021). <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/women/news/2021/01/15/494672/state-womens-leadership-continue-changing-face-u-s-politics/>

28 See Ladam, C., Harden, J. J., and Windett, J. H., Prominent Role Models: High-Profile Female Politicians and the Emergence of Women as Candidates for Public Office, *American Journal of Political Science*, 62(2), 2018.

Consequently, support for women includes tangible changes to the way elections are conducted, including recruitment and the process of running for office. Additionally, the public service systems need to change to adapt more women-friendly and balanced approaches. Finally, our culture has to shift the way we perceive all women in political leadership roles.

Mentor and Sponsor Women With Political Ambition

Many elected women take on mentoring roles for women who show political ambition and talent. Mentoring is defined as a strategy that involves providing knowledge and guidance by someone with previous experience.²⁹ It is an action strategy that has been used by many organizations to attempt to advance and develop women's careers and leadership roles; however, mentoring as a strategy by itself is not enough to advance women's positions.³⁰ Mentoring has a lack of measurability when assessing the impact it has on women's advancement.³¹ It is now being recommended to not only use mentoring, but to also incorporate sponsorship. Sponsorship is an action-oriented strategy that involves women, who have previous knowledge and experience and influence, allowing and encouraging opportunities of growth for other women hoping to one day be influential as well.³² To



be a successful sponsor, a woman needs to advocate for her colleague by helping to advance her abilities and skills, current knowledge, and helping her to network.³³

It is very important to note that there is a clear difference between being a mentor and being a sponsor. A mentor is an individual with experience, and their main responsibility is to advise their mentee.³⁴ A sponsor is an individual with senior level experience, often described as an "influential individual" whose responsibilities include advocating, advancing, and promoting.³⁵ It is also important to recognize that to advance women's leadership roles, especially for women of color, that both mentoring and sponsoring are vital.

Implement Term Limits

Currently, 15 U.S. states have enacted term limits for their state legislators: Maine, California, Colorado, Arkansas, Michigan, Florida, Ohio, South Dakota, Montana, Arizona, Missouri, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Louisiana, and Nevada. However, the term limits within each state vary. For example, some states have term limits to ensure that state legislators do not serve consecutive terms, and other states have lifetime bans.³⁶

Some states are hoping to implement a resolution to introduce term limits for members of the U.S. House of Representatives and members of the U.S. Senate.³⁷ The joint resolution reads, in part: "This joint

29 See Singh, S. and Vanka, S., Mentoring is Essential but Not Sufficient: Sponsor Women for Leadership Roles, *Development and Learning in Organizations*, 34(6), 2020.

30 See Ibid (Singh and Vanka).

31 See Ibid (Singh and Vanka).

32 See Ibid (Singh and Vanka).

33 See Paddison, D., Guided Sponsorship: The Ultimate Tool for Internal Talent Sourcing, *Leader to Leader*, 67, 2013.

34 See Ibid (Singh and Vanka).

35 See Ibid (Singh and Vanka).

36 See National Conference of State Legislatures, "Term-Limited States" (2020). <https://www.ncsl.org/research/about-state-legislatures/chart-of-term-limits-states.aspx>

37 Representatives from Florida, Indiana, Alabama, Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri, Montana, Nebraska, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, Utah, and Wyoming have introduced S.J.Res. 3: A joint resolution proposing an amendment to the Constitution of the United States relative to limiting the number of terms that a Member of Congress may serve.

resolution proposes a constitutional amendment limiting members of the House of Representatives to three terms and members of the Senate to two terms. Terms beginning before the ratification of this article do not count towards term limits.”³⁸ This joint resolution has yet to be ratified.

Research demonstrates that term limits help increase women representation at all levels of government because term limits increase electoral turn-over, thereby creating more open seats. Yet, term limits must be paired with an increase in overall women candidates, so that incumbent women who have reached their term limits are replaced by women candidates as well.³⁹ In fact, the disparity between the amount of male and female elected politicians is evidenced by the lower rates of overall women candidates in many elections. Thus, continuing to find effective strategies to recruit and support women candidates is vital to increase women representation in coming elections.⁴⁰

Expand the House of Representatives

Due to increased population sizes in each of the original districts, many representatives are unable to connect with and adequately represent their constituents. In 1790, each representative represented a district of about 35,000 constituents, and today the average House of Representatives member represents about 770,000 people.⁴¹ With so many constituents, many representatives have become less responsive to their constituents’ needs and voices.⁴²

Since the United States population is continuing to steadily increase, U.S. democracy will continue to become less of a representative government as each member of the House of Representatives will continue to represent increasingly larger amounts of constituents if no changes are made.

According to a recent article,

“The 2010 Census counted 309,183,463 Americans for purposes of apportioning 435 seats in Congress. That meant that the average member of the House represented 710,767 people. The 2020 Census has counted 331,108,434 Americans for purposes of apportioning the same 435 seats in Congress. However, because the overall population has increased by more than 7 percent, the average member of the House is now expected to represent 761,169 people—an increase of 50,402 constituents. Unless something changes, when all the redistricting and gerrymandering fights of 2021 and 2022 are done, the same number of House members will be called upon to provide representation and services to a significantly higher number of people.

Practically, what that means is that representatives will be more distant from the constituents they are supposed to represent, that it will be more difficult for those constituents to advocate effectively on the issues, that it will be less likely

38 See Congress.Gov, “H.J.Res.20 - Proposing an Amendment to the Constitution of the United States to Limit the Number of Terms that a Member of Congress may Serve (2019-2020).”
<https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-joint-resolution/20?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%5B%22term+limits%22%5D%7D&s=1&r=1>

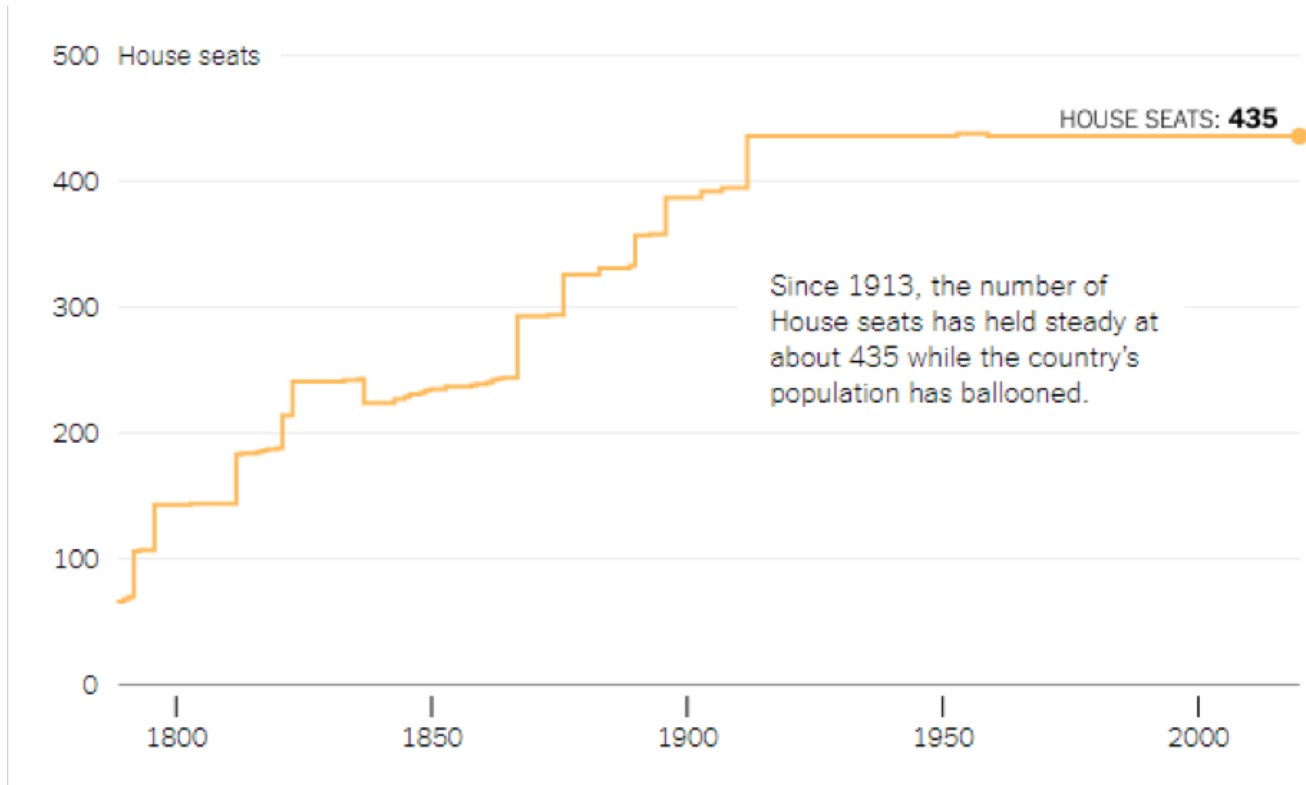
39 See Center for American Women and Politics, “The Impact of Term Limits on Women” (2001).
https://cawp.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/resources/termlimitsimpact_000.pdf

40 See Center for American Women and Politics, “Candidates Matter: Gender Differences in Election 2016” (2017).
https://cawp.rutgers.edu/sites/default/files/resources/closer_look_candidates_matter_2.14.17.pdf

41 See American Academy of Arts and Sciences, “Enlarge the House of Representatives” (2020).
<https://www.amacad.org/ourcommonpurpose/recommendation-1-1>

42 See Ibid (American Academy of Arts and Sciences).

that district offices can quickly respond to queries and meet requests for help. It also means that campaigns for competitive House seats, which will need to reach many more voters, will be more costly—a shift that, if history is any indicator, is likely to increase the influence of billionaire campaign donors and corporate political action committees.”⁴³



The data above express the deep need for increased seats in the House of Representatives in order to have a more reflective democracy.

Conclusion

It has been established that women must accomplish more than men in political leadership in order to be perceived as successful, are held to a higher standard than men, and face increased scrutiny in job performance.^{44, 45} In a political system that values and rewards incumbency and seeks to protect incumbents, women face systemic disadvantages due to the lack of women currently in office. The dependent nature of the election-fundraising cycle leads to the increased protection and advantage

43 See John Nichols, “Expand the US House of Representatives” (The Nation) May 4, 2021. <https://www.thenation.com/article/politics/house-representatives-census>

44 ReflectUS previously published Ensuring Success: What Happens After Women Win exploring this topic in depth. Access this issue brief at <https://reflect.us/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Ensuring-Success.pdf>.

45 See D’vera Cohn and Gretchen Livingston, “Americans’ Views of Women as Political Leaders Differ by Gender,” (Pew Research Center) May 19, 2016. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/05/19/americans-views-of-women-as-political-leaders-differ-by-gender/>

of incumbents, making women's equal representation, and, therefore, a representative democracy, even more difficult to achieve.

Research consistently reveals that incumbents have advantages in fundraising, name identification, political networks, campaign experiences, a presumption of success, and a history with voters.⁴⁶ These factors represent the many obstacles that new politicians in races must face. For women, these challenges often include overcoming bias and running more costly campaigns in order to win. Additionally, many voters look to prevent unnecessary risks of selecting an unknown candidate, making the incumbent an easier choice since voters know what to expect from those previously in office.

For women to move beyond incumbency disadvantages, there must be intentional steps taken. Individual donors and PACs will need to commit to funding structure changes and women will need to be intentionally recruited for open seats. When women run, they must be supported by the party structure and sponsored by other elected women. Additional proposals have gained traction in recent years, including introducing term limits in Congress, expanding the U.S. House of Representatives, and matching small-dollar donations to encourage more constituent engagement to benefit women candidates. While ReflectUS does not take a position on these proposals, it is important to consider these and other innovative ideas towards the goal of increasing the number of women serving in political leadership.

⁴⁶ See Linton Weeks, "Why It's Good to Be The Incumbent," (NPR) November 6, 2012. <https://www.npr.org/sections/itsallpolitics/2012/06/11/154745966/why-its-good-to-be-the-incumbent>



ReflectUS

The ReflectUS Coalition accelerates and maximizes the collective impact of Coalition members, people, and organizations working to expand political leadership of, by, and for all women.

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