

System Failure

**What the 2020 Primary Elections
reveal about our democracy**

May 2021



Primary elections are widely viewed as robustly competitive. But when we analyzed 2020 primary races, we found a pattern of systemic gridlock fortifying white male minority rule.

The outcomes of the 2020 primaries underscore a central tension in US politics: Demographically, white men are a minority, yet politically, they hold 62 percent of all elected offices. At just 30 percent of the population, white men exercise minority rule over 42 state legislatures, the House, the Senate, and statewide offices from coast to coast.

The question is: Why?

Do voters prefer white men as their elected leaders? [Our 2019 report](#) busted the myth of white men's supposed "electability advantage" in general elections. And after running the numbers on the primaries, we can now confirm it: In primary races as in general elections, candidates who are women and people of color perform as well or better than their white male counterparts.

If not voters, what does perpetuate white male minority rule? Our primary research reveals two systemic factors:



The Incumbency Advantage: Sitting elected officials almost always defeat challengers.



The Partisan Demographic Divide: While Democratic candidates look more or less like today's America, Republican candidates do not.

Primary elections provide a stark model of the self-reinforcing dynamics of minority rule. Once in office, state legislators control election laws and districting, and use these levers of power to obstruct the political progress of women and people of color.



At 51 percent of the population, **women are 31 percent of all officeholders.**



At 40 percent of the population, **people of color are 13 percent of all officeholders.**

White Male Minority Rule Defined



White men are 30%
of the population



White men are 62%
of officeholders

While significant majorities of voters favor policies like gun control, automatic voter registration, and universal preschool, most legislators fail to reflect them or their interests. America's diverse demographics and perspectives are largely silenced in the political sphere, and to make sure it stays that way, 43 states are considering or have already passed laws to suppress the vote. **The result of white male minority rule is political stagnation.**

White men aren't more electable, yet their minority rule persists

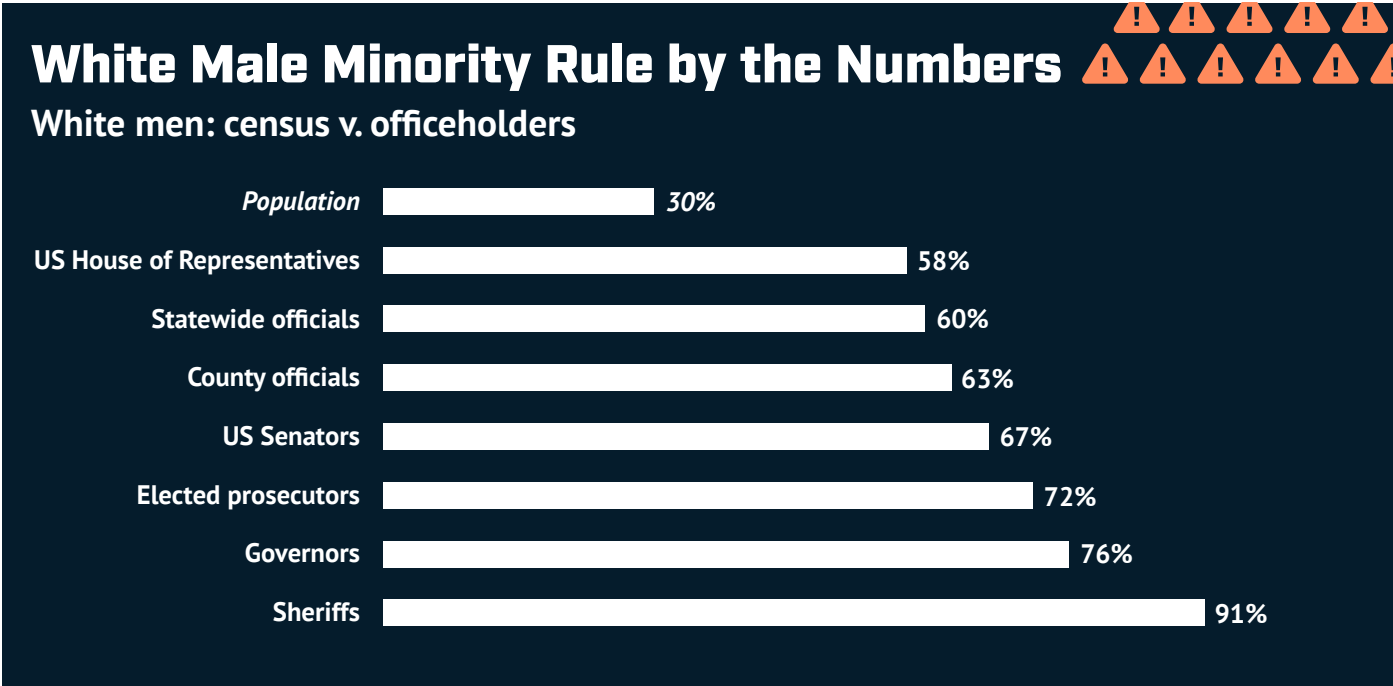
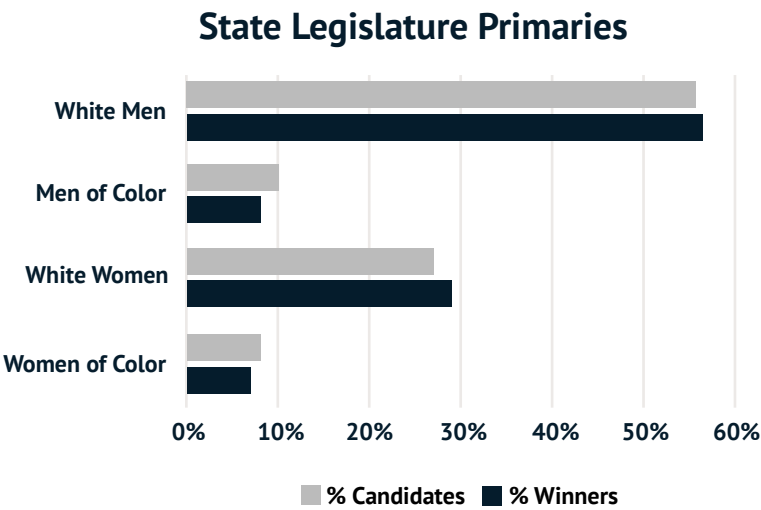
Despite the extreme over-representation of white men in elected office, our opinion research has revealed that a majority of American voters are frustrated with the political old boys' club, and eager to see more women and people of color in office. And our general election analysis consistently finds that white men have no “electability” advantage over other candidates.

Switching our focus to primary elections, we wondered if primary voters feel differently. Are primary voters putting the brakes on demographic change in politics by preferring white male candidates at the ballot box?

Not so, we found.

Primary candidates in all demographics win elections at just about the same rate. Although, at 56 percent of candidates, white men dominate the candidate pool at nearly double their population share, they do not win primary elections at higher rates than other groups.

In state legislature primaries – where the largest number of primary candidates compete – win rates are essentially identical for all demographic groups. And in House and statewide office primaries, women and people of color outperform white men.



Incumbents rule

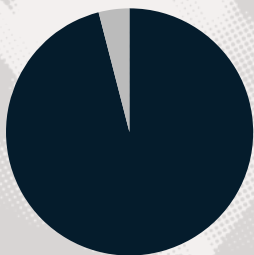
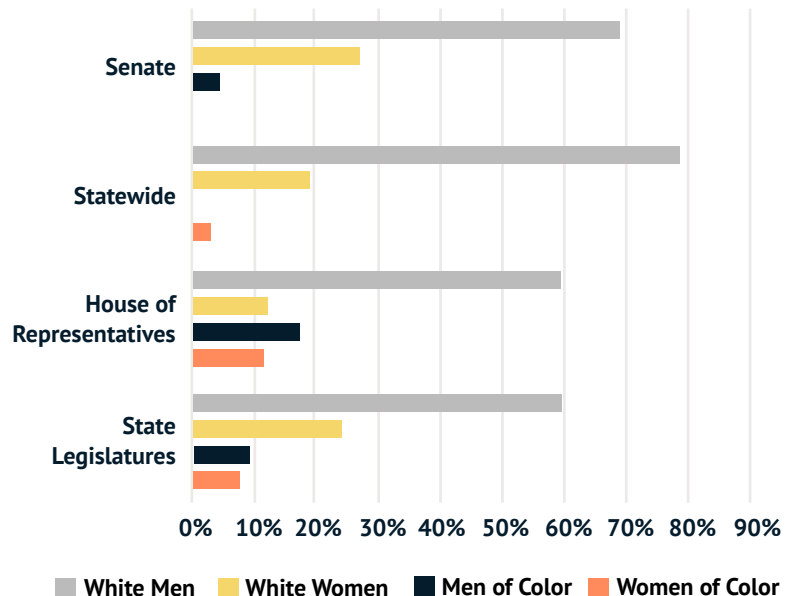
If white men are no more likely to win primary elections than other demographic groups, why do they dominate politics? **One major factor is incumbency.**

Across all levels of office, 96 percent of incumbents won their 2020 primaries, due to advantages in name recognition, fundraising, and gatekeeper favoritism that are virtually insurmountable.

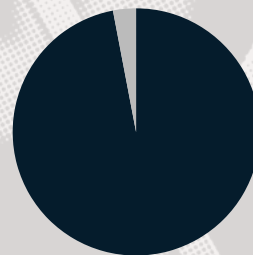
And who are incumbents? Because of the historical barriers faced by women and people of color, **most incumbent officeholders are white men.** In the Senate, white men are 68 percent of incumbents, and in statewide office, they're a whopping 78 percent.

How exactly does white male minority rule persist? In 2020 Congressional primary elections, 97 percent of incumbents won. In the November general election, 96 percent of Congressional incumbents won, again benefiting from the nearly insurmountable advantages incumbency provides.

Incumbents Running in 2020 Primaries



Across all levels of office, 96 percent of incumbents won their 2020 primaries



97 percent of Congressional incumbents won their 2020 primaries

In 2019, the powerful gatekeepers at the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee moved to actively deter challengers by blacklisting of pollsters and other consultants hired to support their races.

Campaign director Brenda Choresi Carter critiqued the DCCC's policy — since reversed — in [The Hill](#) (Jan 2020).



Since so many incumbents are white males, the demographics of the Democratic Party can only change if primary voters get the chance to pick fresh faces such as Reps. Ro Khanna (D-Calif.), Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-N.Y.) and Ayanna Pressley (D-Mass.), each of whom ousted a white male incumbent. The DCCC's refusal to work with companies and consultants who support candidates running against the status quo will further stall the party's growth.

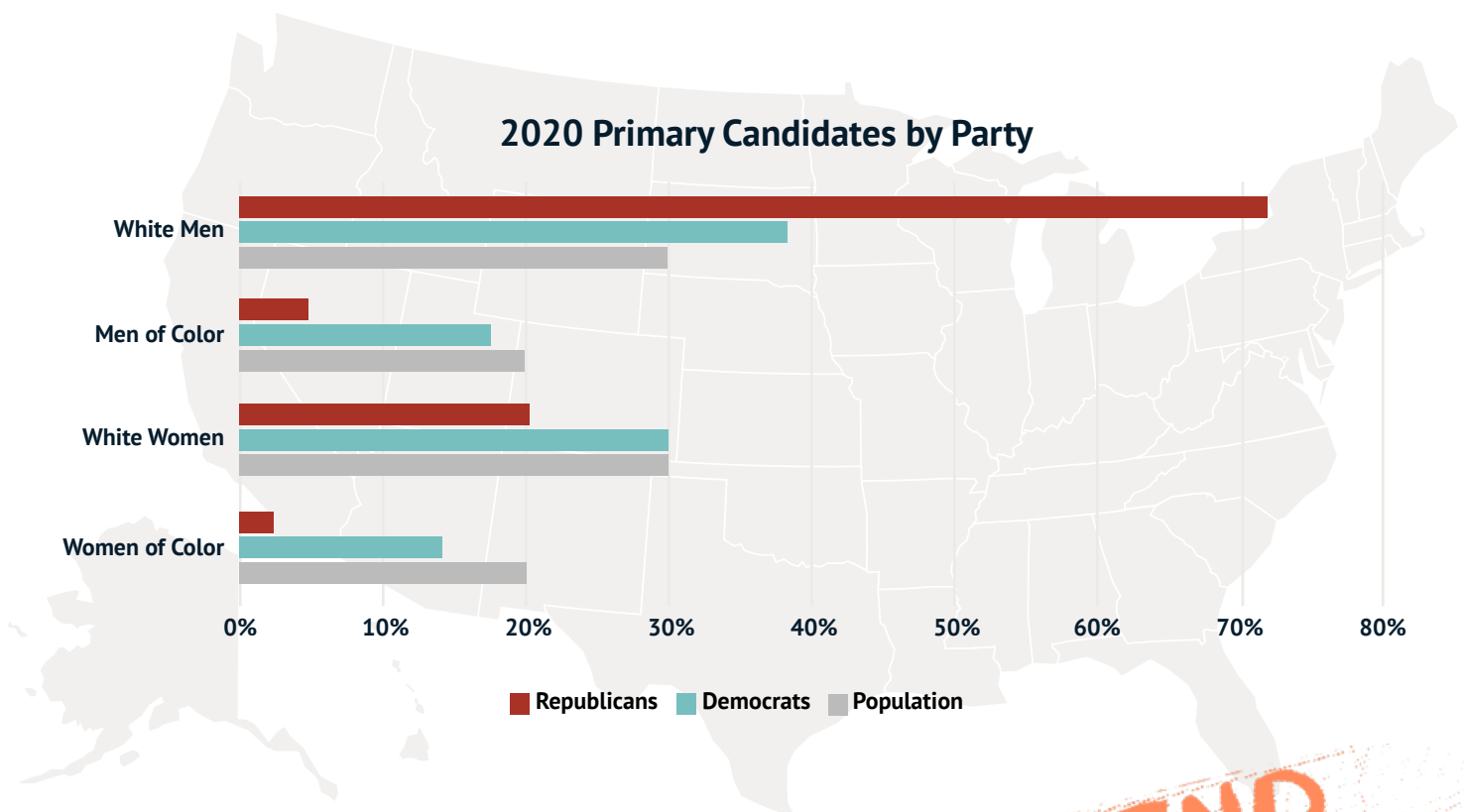


Partisan divide on race & gender

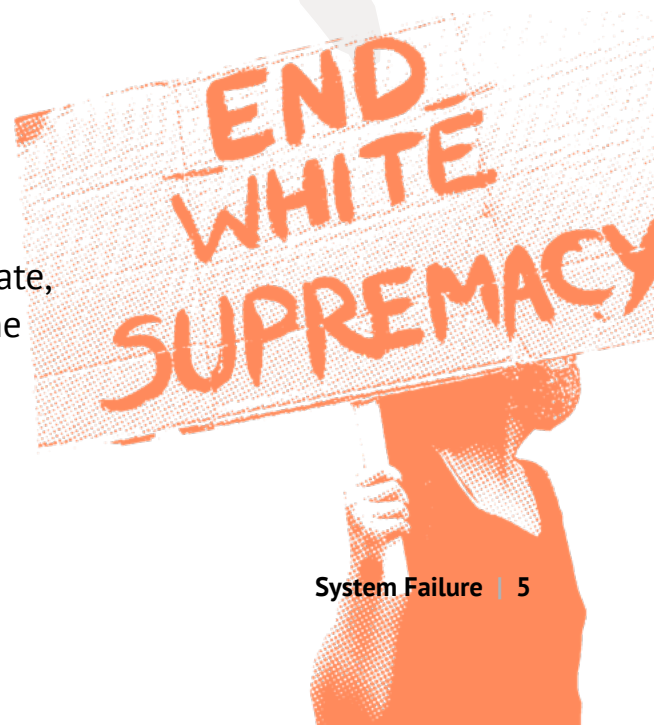
The other factor upholding white male minority rule across our political system is partisan in nature. While today's Democratic Party runs candidates who look more or less like America, Republicans do not.

Since the ascent of Donald Trump, white supremacist policies and rhetoric have become central to the Republican brand. Not surprisingly, GOP candidate demographics follow suit. **Across all office levels, 93 percent of Republican primary candidates were white in 2020.** And while a handful of newly elected Republican Congresswomen have gained outsized notoriety, fewer than one quarter of GOP primary candidates were women.

By contrast, Democratic primary candidates were 44 percent women and 32 percent people of color, nearly matching the demographics of today's America, which is 51 percent women and 40 percent people of color.



Democracy is being held hostage by the mechanisms of incumbency, and the failure of Republicans to field candidates who reflect America. As the data demonstrate, the primary playing field isn't level, and the rules of the game protect the dominance of a single demographic.



About the Reflective Democracy Campaign

The [Reflective Democracy Campaign](#) reports on, funds, and organizes the movement for a democracy whose leaders fully reflect the diversity of the American people. We are the only resource for comprehensive data and analysis on the race and gender of elected officials and candidates at the federal, state, county, and city levels. Our data sets, reports, and other resources are freely available at [WhoLeadsUs](#).

Contact the Campaign for more data and analysis on the demographics of political power. Data on specific ethnicities, levels of office, and/or geographies is available, as well as analysis about election gains by women and people of color, and on the persistent white male overrepresentation distorting our democracy.

For more information, please write to hello@wholeads.us and follow us on Twitter [@WhoLeadsUs](#).

Our recent reports include:

- **Black Representation in Turbulent Times:** Even as white nationalism exploded during the Trump era, [Black leaders made historic gains](#) at the ballot box.
- **Power Shift in America's Cities:** Dramatic gains by women and people of color are [changing the face of power](#) in America's largest cities.
- **Exposing the Criminal Justice System:** Our reports on America's [sheriffs](#) and [elected prosecutors](#) explore the broken demographics of a system foundationally biased against people of color, and harmful to women and families in crisis.

Photo Credits

Page 2: "Senate chamber — North Carolina State Capitol.," by Daderot, public domain

Page 4: Photo by Masaaki Komori on Unsplash

Page 5: Photo by LOGAN WEAVER on Unsplash