

270 to win

CAMPAIGN BEST PRACTICES FOR 2022 & BEYOND

Results from the NDTC Great Democratic Debrief

NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC
TRAINING COMMITTEE

traindemocrats.org

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INTRODUCTION

About the National Democratic Training Committee

Since its founding in late 2016, the National Democratic Training Committee has trained more than 100,000 candidates, staff, and local party leaders.

Following the 2020 election, NDTC met with Democrats from across the country to learn what worked, what didn't work, and how we can best approach upcoming cycles.

The Great Democratic Debrief event served as a reflection and learning experience for those involved in the previous election cycle. Instead of directly dropping off from a campaign, we saw tremendous value in sharing experiences and learning from each other after the election is over—all with a goal to benefit the Democratic ecosystem and future races.

As the next election cycle begins, NDTC is offering this report not as a reflection on 2020, but as a recommendation for how to run efficient and effective campaigns in upcoming elections.

Methodology

To best assess the 2020 cycle, NDTC conducted a combination of focus groups and surveys from three key groups: candidates, campaign staff, and local leaders.

Between November 16 - November 19, NDTC conducted a total of seven focus groups; four included candidate, staff, and volunteers; two included county/precinct chairs; and the last one was a closed debrief for our Staff Academy cohorts.

Success to Date

2200+

Candidates Trained
during 2020 campaign cycle

85,000+

Trainees
during 2020 campaign cycle

235,000+

Lessons Completed
during 2020 campaign cycle

239

VLTs Taken
since March 2020

118,000+

Registrants
to Date

In addition to the focus groups aimed at gathering qualitative data, we designed a survey aimed at gathering quantitative data to help us gain a broad picture of how people were involved in the 2020 election cycle.

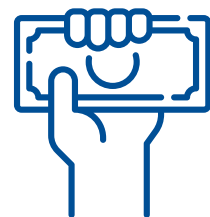
For each audience, we asked specific questions pertaining to their experience based on the primary role they held.

Summary of Key Findings

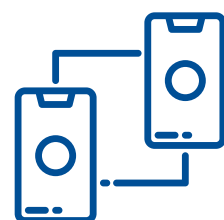
As we approach upcoming election cycles, the National Democratic Training Committee recommends national, state, and local Democratic organizations focus on the following elements to improve Democrats' success moving forward:



Emphasis on the importance of creating, implementing, and adapting complete campaign plans.



Continued investment in the long-term, local infrastructure needed to ensure maintained success.



Prioritization of data access, maintenance, and training.



Creation of campaign culture environments that result in higher-quality, more efficient staff.

Lessons Learned and How to Improve

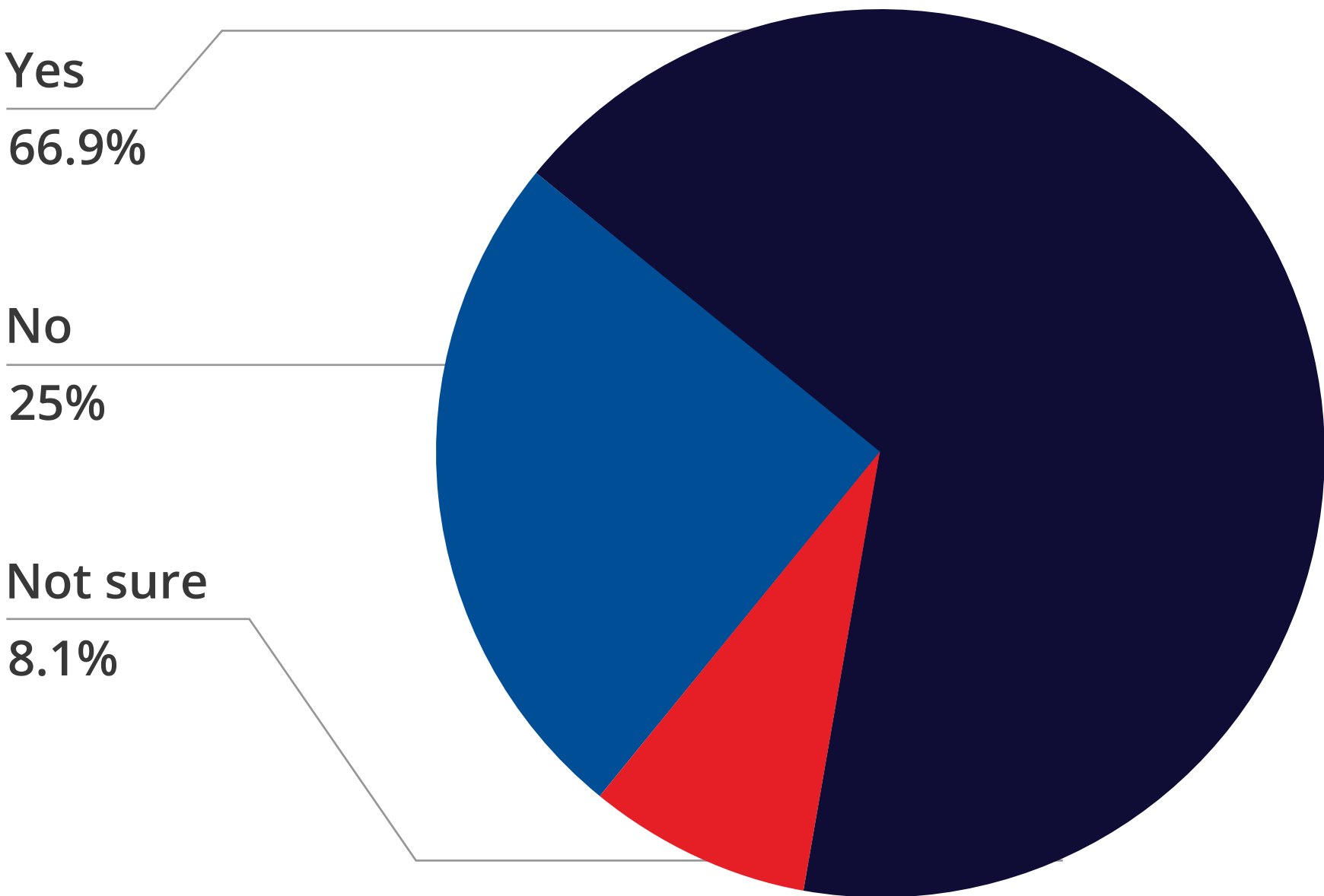


Key Problem:
Campaigns lacked the adaptive campaign plans necessary for success.

Necessity of Campaign Plans

Out of all our findings from discussions with event participants, perhaps most striking was the infrequency of complete campaign plans. Oftentimes campaigns would have incomplete plans, for instance, a plan that solely focused on the vote goal and outcome of the election. Data from the survey further illuminates this idea.

Did the Candidate’s Campaign Have a Plan?



Of the 136 respondents whose primary role in the 2020 election cycle was a candidate, 66.9% (91 respondents) reported having a campaign plan. Yet, when asked about the components of their plan, they fell short in taking into account all aspects of a political campaign plan.

Without the complete picture, it's difficult to determine how to allocate resources. For example, if you have a budget plan but no field plan, how are you planning to reach your vote goal and how would you determine what the budget is spent on?

Likewise, we found that campaigns lacking a formal plan often struggled in adapting to the realities presented by COVID-19. For example, campaigns that did not have a pre-COVID field plan took more time to adapt to a virtual field program.



NDTC'S RECOMMENDATION

The creation, maintenance, and adaptation of a complete campaign plan is critical to success. Without a plan, campaigns are often inefficient, ineffective, and unsuccessful.

In 2022, national, state, and local organizations across the country must improve their campaign planning process. Continued training focused on how to craft and execute a strategic and comprehensive plan will result in campaigns that are more successful overall, and better able to adapt their plan when faced with adversity.

As NDTC approaches our trainings for the next cycle, we will place a specific emphasis on the necessity of complete campaign plans.

OF THE 91 RESPONDENTS WITH A PLAN:

87%

Had a budget plan

85%

Had a
communications plan

66%

Had a GOTV and
fundraising plan

63%

Had a field plan

71%

Had a digital plan

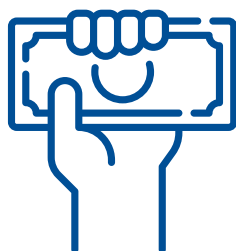
Investment in Long-Term Infrastructure



Key Problem:

Without investment in long-term infrastructure, Democrats are forced to start over each cycle.

Time and time again, we have heard from candidates, staff, and local leaders who faced problems that can be attributed to a lack of long-term infrastructure. These problems largely fell into three categories:



Community building



Voter awareness around down-ballot candidates



Messaging around local issues

Community Building

Candidates and local organizations both faced issues with community building. Many local leaders reported feeling as though candidates only engaged with them when politically necessary. In turn, we heard from candidates who felt isolated from local organizations as Election Day drew near.



On the other hand, candidates who reported engaging in year-round organizing to build relationships with the various communities in their constituency often found success in building the coalitions needed for success.

Voter Awareness Around Down-Ballot Candidates

Many campaigns struggled to increase visibility of their candidates, especially with the information overload from the up-ballot races.

Furthermore, with COVID-19, down-ballot campaigns were forced to pivot their strategy in a way that no longer allowed them to connect and engage with their community in person. This included canceling key events that traditionally offer these candidates a platform to build name recognition.

For this reason, campaigns need to understand it's imperative to build presence within their community throughout the year and not just during election season.

Messaging

When Democrats only engage with local communities during election season, they are unable to effectively discern the issues most important to their constituency.

In red and purple districts especially, campaigns need to adapt their messaging based on the issues prevalent in their community. Voters are more receptive to messaging that focuses on what they are experiencing in their own lives and in their communities.

If a candidate does not routinely engage with a community, they often struggle to identify a message that the community can connect with.

Overall, it is important to continuously pivot back to local-level issues with voters. This was especially notable in a year federal impacts were so strongly felt on the local level—from access to COVID19 testing, unemployment, stimulus, etc.

Candidates/campaigns that were successful in their messaging were able to frame these national conversations in the context of the communities they were speaking to. This only happens when a campaign invests in year-round organizing to best understand the issues facing the communities and constituencies needed to form a winning coalition.



NDTC'S RECOMMENDATION

In short, Democrats need to build a brand in local communities.

The aforementioned problem can only be solved by engaging in year-round, long-term organizing. The relationships required for candidates to build and maintain success are only shaped over time, and cannot be effective when rushed.

The most effective and efficient way to achieve this level of organizing is through investment in long-term, sustainable infrastructure. In many cases, this infrastructure is already being built by dedicated local leaders. In order to build on our success, national and state Democratic organizations must engage with the work already being done by these leaders.

Data Access and Maintenance



Key Problem:

A lack of quality data caused inefficient campaigns.

A frequent complaint among candidates and staff was a lack of access to quality data that allowed for efficient field and fundraising programs. While “bad” data is not a new complaint, the effect of low-quality data was more pronounced due to the pandemic.

Factors which contributed to bad data included:



Dependence on phone and text banking



Little to no utilization of data to monitor progress



Incorrect phone numbers and disconnected lines

Due to the efforts to reduce the spread of the virus, many campaigns depended on phone and text banking to make contact and persuade voters. Traditionally, phone banking provides for a higher contact rate, but lower quality conversations when compared to door-to-door canvassing. Since COVID required campaigns to switch to primarily phone banking, a higher quantity of calls had to be made to make up for a lack of door-to-door canvassing. Without accurate data, this was impossible for campaigns to achieve.

Further, bad data had a significant impact on volunteers. There were many accounts of volunteers receiving “bad” data—for instance, phone banking volunteers receiving lists with incorrect phone numbers, disconnected lines, etc. This was discouraging to volunteers and resulted in a decrease in volunteer engagement.

Additionally, campaigns may have had a plan, strategy, and tactics they wanted to use, but it was apparent that many weren’t using data to monitor their progress or knew how to use the data gathered. Knowing how well your strategy and tactics are performing guides the data-based decision-making process necessary to spend resources and adapt plans in the most effective and efficient way.



NDTC'S RECOMMENDATION

National, state, and local organizations need to properly train candidates on not only how to maintain data, but the importance of doing so.

Without accurate data, campaigns lose their ability to run efficient fundraising and field programs. By instructing candidates on both the “why” and the “how” of data maintenance, campaigns will become more efficient and effective.

Additionally, training must be provided on how to properly collect data in real time. If we expect campaigns to adapt to new circumstances based on data, we must first guide them in what data they should collect and how to collect it.

Campaign
Culture



Key Problem:

Staff that lack the support, pay, or benefits needed to focus on their job are often inefficient and ineffective.

With this election cycle taking place during a pandemic, the number of stressors staff were required to operate under was higher than previous cycles. We found that staff effectiveness and efficiency was related to the following factors:



Financial support



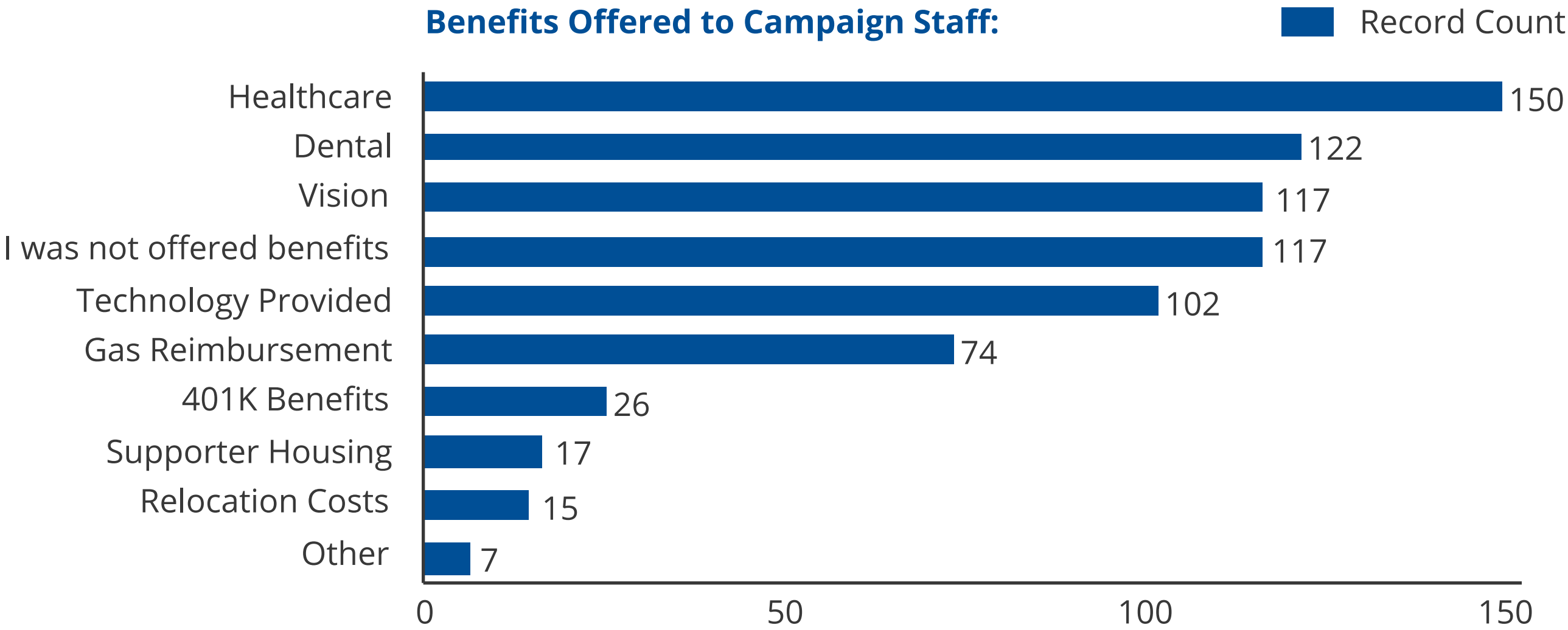
Emotional support



Communication

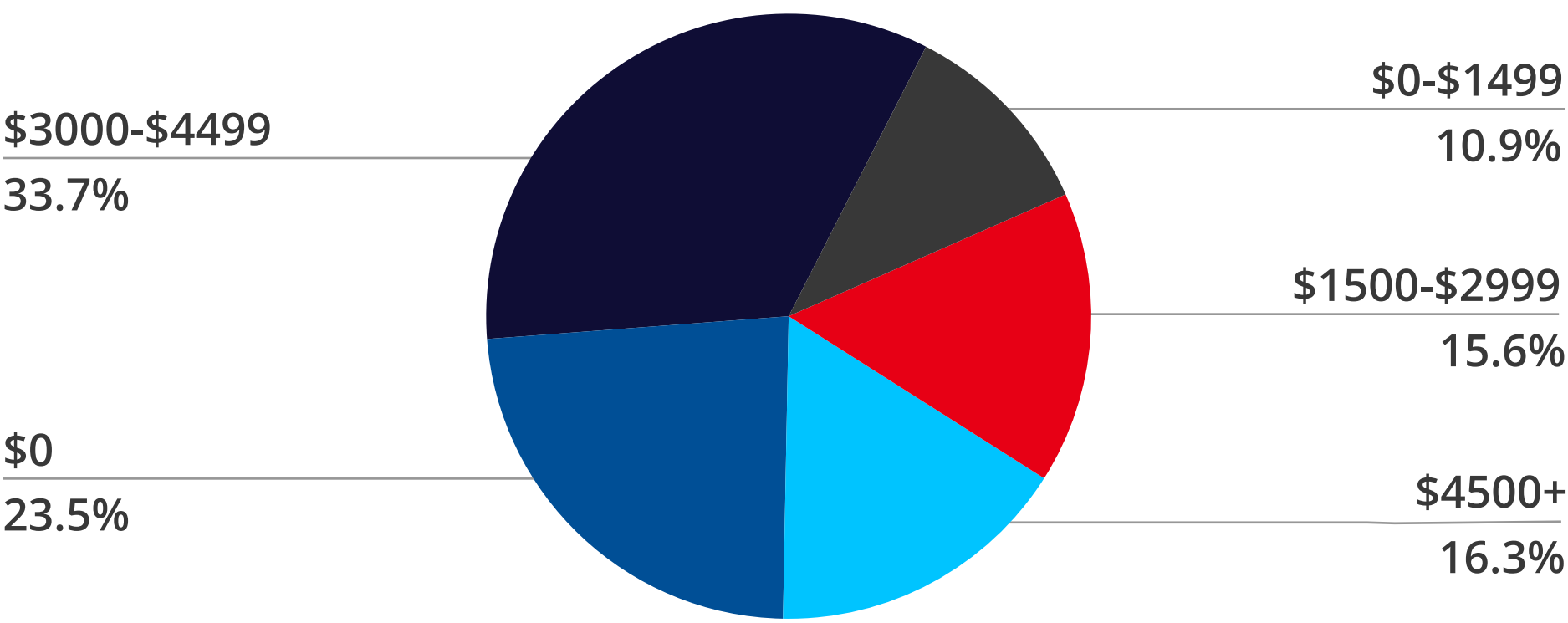
Financial Support

According to our research, 40 percent of campaign staff did not receive benefits of any kind while working on a campaign. 51 percent of campaign staff reported receiving any kind of healthcare benefits. This places staff at enormous risk, particularly if they perform their duties in-person during a pandemic.



Additionally, 50 percent of campaign staff reported receiving a salary under \$3,000 per month.

Campaign Staffers Monthly Payments:



A lack of proper financial support—through either salary or benefits—prevents staff from giving the proper amount of attention needed in order to perform at a high level.

Emotional Support

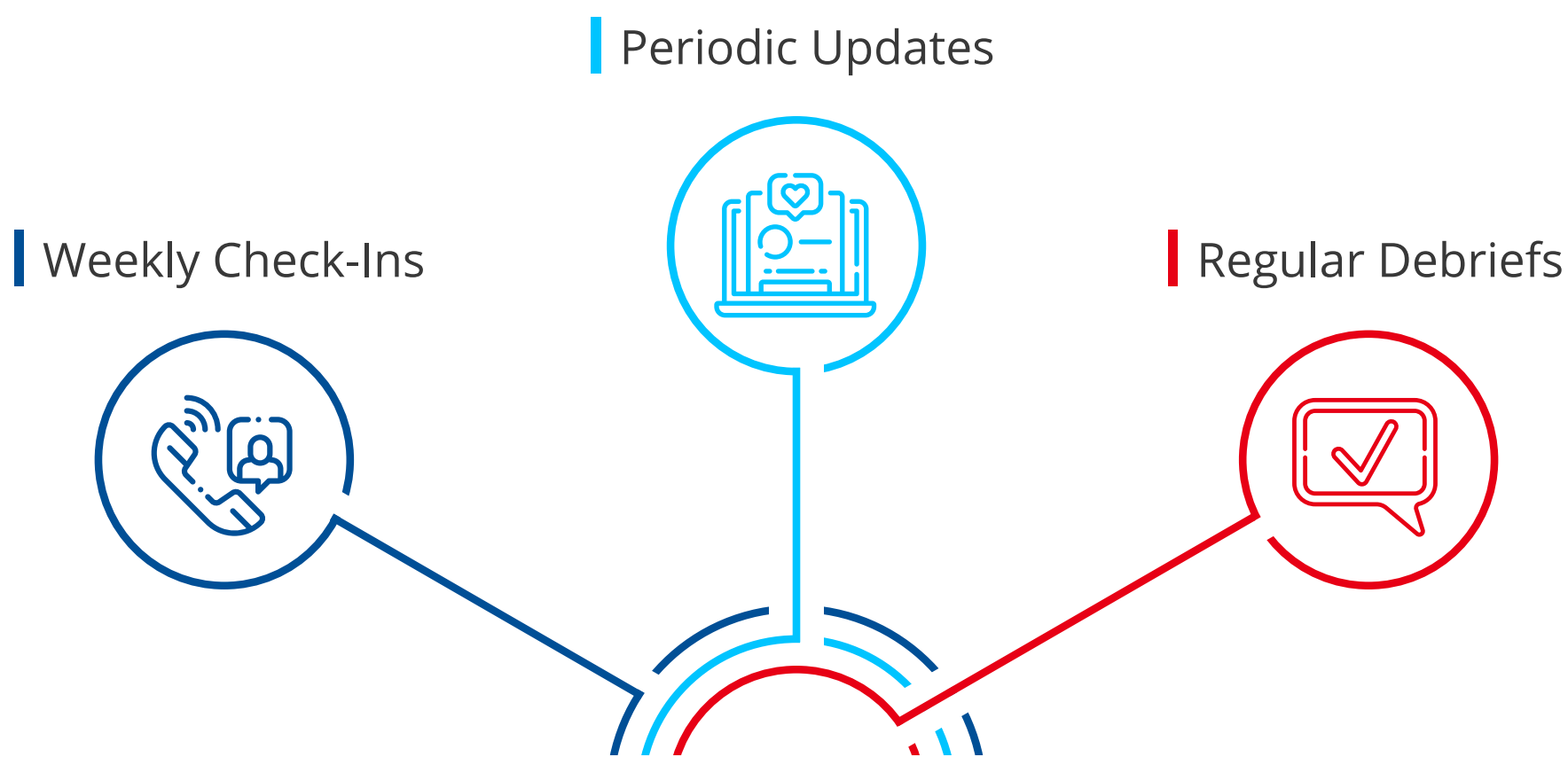
Our research shows tending to one’s mental health is important now more than ever. On some campaigns, staffers were encouraged to take a mental health day when needed. Those who took these mental health days reported returning to work feeling appreciated, engaged, and motivated.

Additionally, staff often felt isolated due to remote work environments. Organizing directors need to create intentional space and time weekly for organizers to gather and support each other without "working" to meet goals, such as virtual team happy hours.

Communication

Open channels of communication were important for campaign staffers and volunteers, especially in the context of remote work due to COVID-19. Without proper communication, staff felt disengaged from their work.

As remote work continues, campaigns need to invest in building the framework for open communication—such as weekly check-ins, periodic updates on progress toward campaign goals, and regular debriefs on what is working well versus areas that need improvement. According to our research, this was crucial to helping staffers and volunteers feel connected to the campaign.



NDTC'S RECOMMENDATION

Campaigns need to live their values. This means prioritizing, investing, and supporting their campaign staff.

When campaign staff work in an environment in which they are supported both financially and emotionally, they are more engaged, more efficient, and more effective in their roles.

While there is no one-size-fits-all approach to what support campaigns can, and should, offer to their staff, it is key to Democratic success that campaigns invest in, and support, their staff.

CONCLUSION

As we approach the next four years, Democratic success will be at risk if we don't take stock and improve each cycle. In order to maintain success at every level, we must review previous challenges and implement strategies to prevent the same mistakes from occurring in the future.

Throughout our process, we heard from countless candidates, staff, and local party leaders who found innovative ways to adapt and overcome adversity. But, we also heard from candidates who suffered from fixable problems.

As we prepare for the 2022 election cycle, Democrats must be better equipped to implement campaign plans, engage in year-round organizing, maintain and analyze data, and create a work culture that allows staff and volunteers to thrive.

Accomplishing these four things will allow campaigns to become more efficient, effective, and successful.



KEY TAKEAWAYS

In 2022 Democrats must be better equipped to:



Implement
campaign plans



Engage in year-
round organizing



Create a work culture
that allows staff and
volunteers to thrive

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