

Pop Quiz: Does Political Candidate Training Work?

A First-of-it's-Kind Qualitative Analysis on Non-Institutionalized Political Trainings

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The image on the front cover is of Jemila Mitchell at a Netroots Nation training event in August 2022. The image is from NDTC's Facebook.

Abstract

The sphere of non-institutionalized political training (training that occurs outside of the higher education setting) is new to the political ecosystem; one that was started, most notably, by President Obama's 2012 campaign. Since then, parties, organizations, campaigns, and movements have been rushing to fill the void between candidates/volunteers *wanting to get involved* and having the knowledge base *to be involved*. Currently, Democrats have the most developed organizations, the front runner being the National Democratic Training Committee (NDTC), with competitors like Arena PAC and partners like Emily's List and Run for Something PAC. The Democratic National Committee's Best Practices Institute is not even as far-reaching as NDTC. One thing is for sure, these organizations have helped institutionalize the past folklore nature of campaign training. To date, there has not been a *quantitative study* on how effective these non-institutionalized trainings are for candidates nationwide… *until now*. I propose that candidates who take these trainings will fare better than those that don't, and when candidates take the average, or just over the average number of courses, they should see a positive correlation in their chances of winning. To determine this, I have been granted exclusive access to NDTC's learner data for general election candidates in the 2020 and 2022 election cycles. Unfortunately, when controlled for state partisanship, a top line analysis shows a strong correlation for candidates losing by just over a percentage point (a -1.30% correlation), yet a strong use case exists for candidates to take a certain number of courses. Albeit, because this is a first-of-its-kind study, and the lackluster data points, I concur that the findings are inscrutable if non-institutional political trainings help candidates at the ballot box.

Introduction

The first week of Oklahoma's COVID-19 lockdown in 2020 brought me two (2) things: a crash course in navigating a Zoom call interview and my first political job—an internship with Oklahoma's largest campaign management firm for Democrats. As a personal quest, I was determined to learn all I could, so I would not be the "dumb intern." After a few Google searches led me astray, I found NDTC's training website. They taught me all of the campaign management basics I needed via on-demand courses, and their live trainings helped me polish those skills (over the countless sleepless midnights, I became pretty fearless on my campaigns). Ultimately, the training helped me become a Campaign Manager for two State Senate races in Oklahoma. While I am receiving a bachelor's of political science from The University of Oklahoma, I can attest that trainings in these non-institutionalized (non-university) spaces have been more beneficial to my learning. I now work on NDTC's Curriculum Team—the team that creates, maintains, and oversees all educational content presented by the organization.

With the data that NDTC has given me, we will look at candidates in the 2020 and 2022 general elections—1,585 and 943 candidates, respectively. Together, these 2,528 candidates took 3,389 courses, 8,279 live trainings, and downloaded 419 resources (more about each of these in the following subsection). With that, I propose that candidates who take the training that the NDTC provides should see a *positive correlation* in election results. Furthermore, when candidates take the average, or just over the average number of courses (as determined by other learners in their cohort), they should see a *positive correlation* in their chances of winning.

About the National Democratic Training Committee

The National Democratic Training Committee PAC (colloquially referred to as "NDTC") is the largest training organization for Democrats nationwide ("About NDTC"). Created by then-campaign consultant Kelly Dietrich in 2016, NDTC's mission has been to empower Democrats in local, state, and federal races with free on-demand and in-person learning experiences. NDTC has three main methods of teaching:

On-Demand Courses & Mini-Lessons: they host 120+ online courses, taking learners from the debut of their campaign with "So You Think You Want to Run?" to their final days of a campaign with a "GOTV" (get out the vote) lesson ("About NDTC"). These courses are self-paced and self-administered; range anywhere from thirty (30) minutes to two (2) hours; and some feature in-unit videos, animated situations, quizzes, and tests.

"Virtual Live Training" and In-Person Trainings: primarily online, these are either solo or co-hosted with a partner organization that takes learners into detail on one (1) metric of a campaign. This can be a training on how to keep a candidate's message and reputation on track with "How to Connect with Voters Through Personal Stories" (Powers) to helping candidates speak now to the ever-growing social media field with "How to Engage and Activate your Audience" (Calvillo-Rivera).

Resources: from phone banking scripts to interview preparation worksheets, the downloadable resources either (1) give the learners the files used in a course/virtual live training or (2) allow them to work independently.

> "The National Democratic Training Committee is an effective tool to win elections; We'll get better candidates and better results. This is the tool the party needs to win more local elections."
> **Dick Durbin,** United States Senator (Illinois)

This method is the newest, which is why we see such a low number of resources downloaded.

They also have three (3) types of learners. When creating an account in the NDTC's LMS (learning management system), learners will self-identify as Candidates, Campaign Staff, or Local Leaders (i.e., party chairs, local activists, etc.). These learner groups will have unique recommended courses and trainings given to them via the online "Roadmap" (in other words, their suggested courses). For this study, I will only focus on learners who have self-identified as candidates and listed themselves in the 2020 or 2022 general elections.



A promotional graphic for an NDTC training event on May 13, 2023. (NDTC's Facebook)

A Preview of the Results

As aforementioned, a top line regression shows a -1.30% strong correlation between candidate courses and their chances of winning. Furthermore, a -0.5% correlation exists between candidates attending live trainings and winning. There is not a statistically significant correlation with candidates using resources. Unfortunately, this data does not show (1) what trainings/resources were taken, (2) when they were used, or (3) if the courses/trainings were finished—in my opinion, these additional metrics would be a better level of analysis (more in my "Limitations" section).

Notice of My Conflict of Interest

The data I have received has come from NDTC's data team, and I am returning my findings to the NDTC Leadership Team ("Meet Our Team"). While I am a lover and learner of what we create, *I have not been asked nor required to produce positive findings in this report*. Additionally, I have not been paid, reimbursed, or otherwise compensated for my research by the organization.

Additionally, in line with my non-disclosure agreement with the National Democratic Training Committee PAC, I am redacting all personal identifying information I received as part of the dataset. This includes the candidate's first name, last name, email, phone number, and office name. I will use the state and the generalized office they are running for in my analysis when applicable.[1] I will only name candidates or officials who have agreed to give public statements to NDTC in quotations about NDTC trainings. Still, I will keep all information as generalized as possible for their confidentiality.

Literature Review

While the literature on campaign trainings in non-institutional spaces is shallow, a few studies have tried to understand specific resources that training programs bring to help candidates. Trainings play an *essential role* in helping women run for office, and more so that creating programs specifically for women of color can result in a positive increase in women of color in politics (Sanbonmatsu, 2015). In the same context of courses, given ethics-based scenarios in a controlled setting, campaign officials aligned more with standing ethical rules than those without the trainings (Wielhouwer, 2004).[2] So, creating programs for specific identities helps bring them to "the table" and then training those candidates and their

1 Oklahoma State Representative rather than Oklahoma State Representative District #40.

2 "Ethics" in terms of financial ethics, not moral ethics.

staff on ethics violations can help them when they experience real ethical violations.

In many trainings I have participated in, the organizations bring role models that trainees (like me) can admire. These have been current office holders, past office holders, and campaign professionals, to name a few. The correlation of participant identification with role models is *positively* associated with enhanced political ambition. In other words, the more similar demographics you hold with the role model, the more ambitious you become in politics—because you can "see" yourself in those positions. This is the "breaking of the glass ceiling" that many women mention when attempting to run for office that a woman has not held before (Reilly, 2016).

Moving away from focusing on gendered political training, trainings that occur within the partisan context are more beneficial to those learners than those that are nonpartisan. Rozell, stated, "... evidence to date suggests that the efforts of groups that think strategically and work within the party system bring greater rewards than do the activities of those groups that appear less strategically-oriented" (Rozell). While we see some non-partisan training organizations, the overwhelming majority have either a partisan or policy bias[3], including NDTC.

Finally, while this is a relatively new realm of political campaigns, we should expect more capital—both human and financial—and organizations to focus on training candidates and staff. Increased media attention on political consulting has positively increased the number of political consultants nationwide (Panagopoulos, 2006). With that, and the increased attention that training has been getting year-over-year, we may see more training organizations arise. After the 2016 presidential election brought NDTC and Arena to the table (and others), I'd expect more organizations should be coming ("About Arena"; "About NDTC").

However, as I foreshadowed in the opening, and echoed by Sanbonmatsu, "more research is needed on the political organizations, parties, networks, community groups, and (perhaps) other trainings that are helping minority women reach office" (Sanbonmatsu 2015).

Hypothesis on Trainings

My hypothesis is that when candidates take an average number of trainings, they will benefit the most. I say "average" because of this duality: one (1), those candidates who take too-few trainings will not benefit enough from the trainings; while two (2), those candidates who take too-many trainings are relying too much on them (instead of realizing they are not in a position to win their seat). To fully examine the results, I will break my hypothesis in half. First, we will look at the value of training in sum, then move into an examination of the number of courses.

Methods

As noted, the data presented in this paper has been given to me by the NDTC Data Team. It includes those learners who (1) self-identified as a candidate when creating their

3 For example, even organizations that seem non-partisan, like Run for Something, have a bias; their mission is to "build sustainable power for Democrats in all 50 states" ("Candidate Support System").

> "Since I launched my campaign for Congress more than a year ago, I've won my primary, outraised my opponent and polls are show us nearly tied. The National Democratic Training Committee's support and training courses have been invaluable throughout this process."
> **Lauren Underwood,** United States Representative (IL-14)

NDTC account and (2) during the election season confirmed they were a candidate via a pop-up on the NDTC website and other outreach methods. Only candidates who did both are included in this dataset.

The table below (Table 1) lists all data points used in my research. All variables excluding "biden_2020_vote_share" (MIT Election Data and Science Lab) and "biden_win" (National Archives), were given to me. I added those two data points to control for partisanship, but I believe that President Joe Biden winning or losing a state in the 2020 presidential election is the better-determining factor.

Finally, in addition to controlling for partisanship by Biden's election outcome in 2020, I wanted to look at the differences in blue, battleground, and red states. I used a FiveThirtyEight model and took the top 10 (ten) bluest and reddest states; then used data from USAFacts for the 2020 battleground states (although these are widely agreed upon).

Table 1. Data Variables

Title	Variable Name	Description
Year of Election	year	The year the candidate ran for office (either 2020 or 2022).
LMS ID Number	id	The unique ID number given to the candidate by the LMS. This is the "primary key" variable.
State of Race	state	The state in which the election took place, two letter abbreviation.
Title of Office	office_title	The title of office the candidate ran for.
Level of Race	level	The level of the office the candidate ran for (federal, state, county, municipal, and city).
Election Outcome	won	True/1 if the candidate won their election. False/0 if the candidate lost their election.
Number of Courses Started	courses	The number of online courses the candidate started.
Number of Events Attended	events	The number of live trainings the candidate registered for.
Number of Resources Downloaded	resources	The number of resources downloaded by the candidate.
Total Number of Educational Materials	total_collateral	The total number of educational materials used *(Courses + Events + Resources)*
Biden Vote Share in District in 2020	dem_2020	Per district data (by NDTC) on the percentage of Biden's vote share.
Biden Vote Share in the State in 2020	biden_2020_vote_share	The state level of Biden's vote share.
State Outcome of Biden's Election	biden_win	True/1 if Biden won their election. False/0 if Biden lost their election.

The following table shows the states selected (Table 2).

Results

NDTC posted their 2022 midterm election results touting that 760+ candidates who took their trainings won their elections (with 60% running in a red district), the data I have does not include that high of a number ("NDTC's 2022 Midterm Success"). This can be for a multitude of data cleaning strategies I used (e.g., only using general election results, only using records with all information given, etc.), so we will only focus on the data set.

The dataset that I have contains 2,528 candidates; 1,585 from 2020 and 943 from 2022. These candidates, collectively, took 3,389 courses, 8,279 live trainings, and downloaded 419 resources. Candidates from both years come from all fifty (50) United States, plus the District of Columbia. In 2022, there was also one (1) candidate from the United States Virgin Islands—showing how geographically versatile political trainings can be. The dataset contains candidates running for 121 office titles, everything from school board to US Senate. The on the page before tables show the offices and states that have over one hundred (100) candidates.

Table 2. State Partisanship for the 2020 Election

Blue States	Battleground States	Red States
California, Delaware, District of Columbia, Hawaii, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, Rhode Island, & Vermont	Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada, North Carolina, Pennsylvania, & Wisconsin	Alabama, Arkansas, Idaho, Kentucky, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Dakota, Tennessee, West Virginia, & Wyoming

For Blue and Red States: I took the ten (10) most partisan states from Rakich's article. For Battleground States: "What Are the Current Swing States, and How Have They Changed over Time?"

Chart 3. Most Candidates by Office Title

Office Title	Number of Candidates
State Representative	1,005
State Senator[A]	240
County Legislature/ Executive Board	180
Commissioner	143
Council	141
School Board	120

A In 2020, "State Senator" was used; while in 2022, "State Senate" was used. For simplicity, I have cleaned the dataset to combine these two titles into "State Senate" in line with "State Representative."

Chart 4. Most Candidates by State

Office Title	Number of Candidates
Georgia	189
Illinois	189
California	187
North Carolina	131
Florida	128
Texas	114
Indiana	110
Michigan	100

Is there Value in Non-Institutionalized Political Training?

Top line results show that about one-third (⅓) of candidates who took NDTC's trainings won their elections in both 2020 and 2022 (as seen in Table 5). With over 794 candidate wins, there is undoubtedly value to the trainings they provide.

However, when looking at the top line regression results when controlling for partisanship (with the "biden_won" value), the picture is *not as perfect*. We see a -1.30% strong correlation between candidate courses and their chances of winning (Regression 1). Furthermore, there is a -0.5% correlation between candidates attending live trainings and winning; yet there *is not* a statistically significant correlation with candidates using resources.

Now, moving into my double controlled experiments—controlling for both election partisanship ("biden_win") and state partisanship (blue, battleground, and red states), we see more negative correlation results (Regression 2, Regression 3, and Regression 4). Interestingly, we see there is not a strong correlation between the courses taken and candidates winning in blue states. Still, there is a correlation in battleground and red states (albeit negative). The most interesting, to me, is that candidates in red states seem to fare better with taking courses than those in battleground states.

While the amount of other data variables I was given looks like I could run additional regressions—no regressions that I ran showed a *statistically significant positive correlation*. (e.g., level of race, title of office, those two plus blue/swing/red sates, etc.).

Table 5. Topline Results

Year	Candidates	Candidate Wins	Percent of Wins
2020	1,585	453	28.58%
2022	943	341	36.16%

Regression 1. Topline Regression on Courses

Dependent Variable: won	
courses	-0.013*** (0.003)
biden_win	0.173*** (0.018)
Constant	0.242*** (0.014)
Observations	2,528
R2	0.043
Adjusted R2	0.042
Residual Std. Error	0.454 (df = 2525)
F Statistic	56.400*** (df = 2; 2525)
Note:	p<0.1; p<0.05; p<0.01

More Courses, Better Chances?

While the shown data nullifies the positive use case of training material via correlations, the second (2nd) part of my hypothesis is still untested (if taking above the average number of courses helps candidates). To test this, I segmented the data set into the three groupings of states (list in Table 2) and further segmented the dataset to only to produce candidates who took zero to ten (0-10) courses. Each chart shows the percentage of candidates who took the number of courses listed on the x-axis and won, there is a yellow line showing the trend line, and a dashed vertical line showing the average number of courses for each chart.

For blue states, we see that the average number of courses taken is about five (5) courses per candidate, and the highest odds of winning are those candidates who take either four (4) or six (6) courses.

For swing states, we see that the average number of courses taken is about four and a half (4.5) courses per candidate, and the highest odds of winning are those candidates who take either four (4) or seven (7) courses.

	Regression 2. Regression on Training in Blue States	Regression 3. Regression on Training in Battleground States	Regression 4. Regression on Training in Red States
Dependent Variable: won			
courses	-0.009 (0.006)	-0.016** (0.008)	-0.014** (0.007)
biden_win	null[B]	0.104** (0.047)	null[C]
Constant	0.464*** (0.024)	0.269*** (0.042)	0.249*** (0.024)
Observations	519	564	361
R_2	0.005	0.016	0.011
Adjusted R_2	0.003	0.013	0.008
Residual Std. Error	0.497 (df = 517)	0.468 (df = 561)	0.420 (df = 359)
F Statistic	2.455 (df = 1; 517)	4.666*** (df = 2; 561)	3.960** (df = 1; 359)
Note:	p<0.1; p<0.05; p<0.01		

B This value is blank in the R regression, I decided to add "null" because Biden won all of these states.
C Same as above, except Biden lost all of these states.

Finally, for red states, we see that the average number of courses taken is just over four and a half (4.5) courses per candidate, and the highest odds of winning are those candidates who take five (5), six (6), or seven (7) courses.

This means, the second (2nd) hypothesis stands correct—those candidates who take the average or just above the average number of courses, so anywhere from four (4) to seven (7) courses, seem to fare better than their counterparts who take more or less. However, my first (1st) hypothesis was wrong. As we saw in the regression results (Regression 1, Regression 2, Regression 3, and Regression 4) and the data trend lines in each chart (Chart 1, Chart 2, Chart 3), the more courses you take, the more likely you are to lose your election (a discussion on this is in the Discussion & Conclusion section). Taken together, taking too many trainings can actually hurt candidate outcomes.

Chart 1. Percentages of Courses Taken & Won, Blue States Only

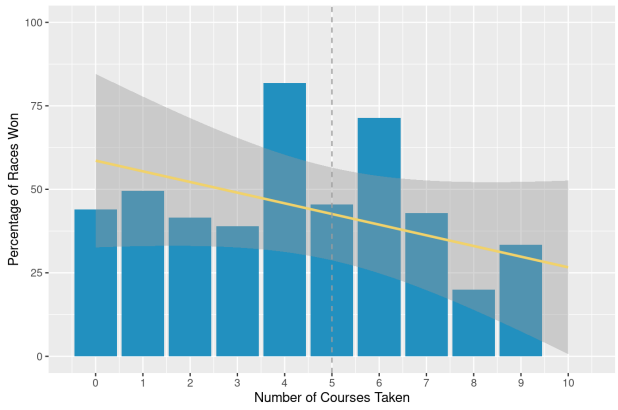
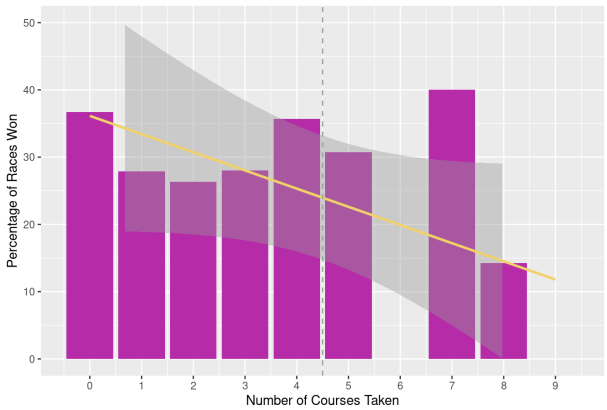
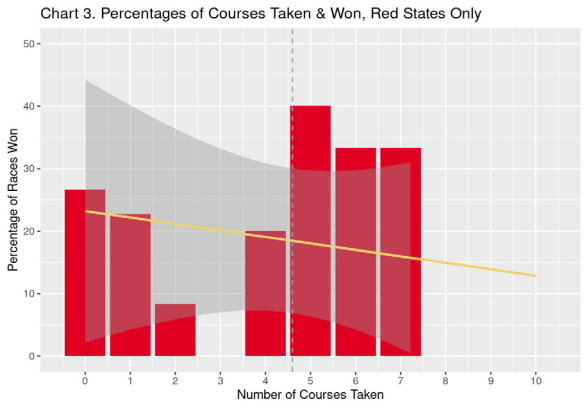


Chart 2. Percentages of Courses Taken & Won, Swing States Only





Limitations

While this is the most qualitatively comprehensive look into political trainings, this cannot—should not—be the last. My data is limited, and because of that, I do not believe training political candidates in non-institutionalized trainings should be discounted.

The data is lackluster, not because of the lack of effort from NDTC, but by the user experience (UX) of the NDTC LMS. For example, all candidates in my data set had to self-identify as such, meaning some people could lie while others might not see the "pop-up" asking about their status. My data does not show course or live training completion, only starts; it does not show what courses are taken nor when they are taken ; it does not offer any test or in-course quiz information; finally, and most importantly, the LMS does not require demographic data to be collected to create the account.

This research only looks at one (1) training firm that focuses on Democrats. I contacted two (2) Republican organizations (including the CAWP, from Sanbonmatsu's article) and six (6) other Democratic institutions. Despite contacting these other organizations, only NDTC agreed to provide data and interviews.

Finally, this analysis is limited by looking at candidates only. Organizations train campaign staff and local leaders too. NDTC had a program called Staff Academy which takes those interested in politics with no experience to ready for a full-time position on campaigns ("Staff Academy"). A potential avenue for future research is to investigate how training campaign staffers can help candidates, campaigns, and causes win too.

Discussion & Conclusion

As we have seen in this paper, the value of political trainings is not shown at the ballot box—but that does not mean there is no value to them. The value might come in a more professional candidate, one that clearly articulates their message, connects with voters, and aligns themselves with their party's platform (Rozell). It can be shown, as in Wielhouwer's paper, that candidates and their campaign staff respond better to ethical issues. But it also might show in their continued community outreach even after elections. In brief, I still am steadfast in my belief that non-institutional political trainings help candidates, campaigns, and causes.

To sum up my findings, we see that candidates who take more and more courses fare worse than their less-trained counterparts. While we don't know what courses or when these courses are taken, it is my belief that they take additional courses because they already identify themselves in a position where they are more likely to lose. While NDTC and other organizations do not have a "cap" on how many courses they will let candidates take—it might be in their best interests to do so.

In the future, a more encompassing, thorough examination with data from multiple organizations, and with representation from all sides of the political spectrum is needed. Furthermore, looking at the training courses of campaign staffers is needed too. This is the start of the efficacy trials of political trainings—not the end.

Acknowledgement

I would be amiss to conclude this paper without acknowledging my team at the National Democratic Training Committee, who helped make this study possible. First, Lead Data Analyst Jaco Chandra and Data Visualization Consultant Michael Dunphy, for providing the data I analyzed; Instructional Designer Donald Riddle, my supportive manager; and Founder and CEO Kelly Dietrich, I am forevermore thankful for your organization. Furthermore, I'd like to send my sincere gratitude for their support, my entire Curriculum Team, and the two (2) people who helped me land this internship—Strategic Partnerships Manager Allison Senanayake and Associate Director of People Operations Akiya Brown.

Onward!

> "Democrats at every level can benefit from NDTC's free training and resources. Their commitment to help Democrats across the country is what our party needs to be successful this cycle and for years to come."
>
> **Kamala Harris,** Vice President of the United States

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All images and quotes are from NDTC's Facebook page.

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With data from The National Democratic Training Committee PAC. Created for a Capstone Seminar in Political Science at *The* University *of* Oklahoma.