

Governing in Crisis Teaching Guide

**David Thornburgh, President and CEO of the Committee of Seventy
Ensuring that our Elections are Fair and Safe**

Interview Summary

On October 31, 2019, Governor Wolf signed into law an historic election reform bill that had moved through the legislature with bipartisan support. Among other reforms, it authorized no-excuse, mail-in voting in Pennsylvania for the first time. That reform faced its first practical test when the pandemic struck, and the volume of mailed ballots cast in the June primary election increased dramatically. Even larger numbers of mailed ballots are expected in the November presidential election, and the intervening months have brought questions about the reliability of the U.S. Postal Service, partisan skirmishing in Harrisburg, and a number of election-related lawsuits. David Thornburgh – the President and CEO of the Committee of Seventy, a good governance advocate, and perhaps Pennsylvania’s leading authority on elections and election reform – discusses these issues and offers practical guidance for those who will be voting in November. Sharing perspectives gained from his service as Chair of the Pennsylvania Redistricting Reform Commission and as Founder of Draw the Lines, he also looks ahead to offer insights into the redistricting processes that will follow the completion of the 2020 census.

Video Topics

- (0:00) Introduction
- (8:23) Summary of 2019 Pennsylvania Election Legislation
- (15:29) Overview of Mail in Voting and its Challenges and Benefits
- (21:24) 2020 Primary Election Challenges and Lessons Learned
- (30:57) Best Practices for Voting
- (37:16) Redistricting Reform
- (43:58) Conclusion

Potential Uses:

- Post a governance series video on Canvas and ask students to respond to a discussion question about the video, as well as comment on 1-2 of their classmates’ posts.
- Show a clip of the video during class to enrich learning, emphasize a point, and/or contextualize a topic.
- Create a resource folder on Canvas that includes governance series videos, accompanied by “learn and do more” documents, as well as other links to support student growth related to current events.
- Incorporate a governance series video into pre-class readings for a live discussion using or

adapting the questions below.

Suggested Written Reflection Questions

- What changes were made to Pennsylvania's elections process under *Act 77*? How has this bipartisan election reform prepared PA for success as COVID-19 brings new challenges?
- According to David Thornburgh, how safe is voting by mail? How safe is voting in person? You may want to view the Blue Ribbon Commission on Pennsylvania's Election Security's *final report* for more insight. After assessing the safety of in-person and by-mail voting, what precautions have been put in place to prevent voter fraud?
- What did you find interesting in the interview? What is something that you disagreed with?

Suggested Classroom Discussion Questions

- What reforms do you believe are still needed to ensure a safe, timely, and effective election?
- In 2016, approximately 60% of the voting eligible population voted in the presidential election. Why do you think voter turnout in the United States is lower than in other democracies? How will voter suppression look in the 2020 presidential election?
- How does redistricting and gerrymandering impact democracy? Who do you think should be responsible for redrawing our electoral districts? What does the *redistricting process* look like in your state?

Related Reading

- Learn more about *why redistricting matters* and the consequences of how district lines are drawn.
- Pew Research Center's found that *As COVID-19 cases increase, most Americans support 'no excuse' absentee voting.*
- See how a *Historic primary paves way for successful general election in Pennsylvania.*
- Voting by mail has existed for centuries; Read *how mail-in voting began on Civil War battlefields.*
- Visit *Over The Line* to examine redistricting and its impact on communities.
- Check out U.S. Supreme Court cases *Vieth v. Jubelirer* and *Gill v. Whitford* on gerrymandering.
- Check out Pennsylvania Supreme Court Cases *Holbrook v. Pennsylvania* and *League of Women Voters v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* on the constitutionality of gerrymandering.

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