

Preserving Democracy Teaching Guide

David Thornburgh, President and CEO of the Committee of Seventy
Time for Truth about Pennsylvania's 2020 Presidential Election

Interview Summary

Pennsylvania's historic election-reform law, which took effect on October 31, 2019, authorized no-excuse, mail-in voting and passed both houses of the legislature with strong bipartisan support. After the presidential election in 2020, then-President Trump and his allies, including some elected officials from Pennsylvania, unsuccessfully sought to overturn the results of our election in every available forum, including the courts and the Congressional session that was interrupted for several hours by the January 6 riot in the Capitol. David Thornburgh is the President and CEO of The Committee of Seventy, a non-partisan organization that was founded in Philadelphia in 1904 and is one of the country's oldest good government groups. Its mission emphasizes strengthening democracy and protecting and improving the voting process in Pennsylvania. Mr. Thornburgh is considered by many to be Pennsylvania's leading expert on elections. He will discuss the issues surrounding an election that has been relentlessly attacked as fraudulent by some but that most have concluded was free and fair.

Video Topics

- (0:00) Introduction
- (9:09) PA Election Reform Act (Act 77 of 2019)
- (15:50) Overview of Mail in Voting
- (26:06) 2020 Election Litigation
- (38:08) Next Steps in Election Reform
- (44:23) Combatting Misinformation and Political Violence
- (52:00) 2021 Redistricting
- (57:25) Closing

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

- David Thornburgh refers to the Pennsylvania presidential election as the “ubiquitous perfect storm.” What do you think he means by this? How could these political and election administration issues have been defused before the election?
- Election officials could not start counting mail in ballots until 7:00 am on election day. In hindsight, if you were an election official in Pennsylvania, how would you have prepared for election day? If you were a legislator, how would you reform Pennsylvania’s election laws to better prepare for future elections?
- What did you find interesting in the interview? What is something that you disagreed with?

Suggested Classroom Discussion Questions

- David Thornburgh gave Pennsylvania a B+ for its performance and an A for effort in the presidential election. Why did he give it a B+? What grade would you give Pennsylvania?
- The Pennsylvania Supreme Court barred Congressman Mike Kelly and others’ challenge to Act 77 by the doctrine of laches. The Court has been criticized for not answering whether Act 77 is constitutional. Do you think the Court should have spoken to the constitutionality of Act 77?
- Moving forward, what issues does Pennsylvania still need to address to better prepare for future elections?

Related Reading

- SCOTUSblog and Election Law at Ohio State are tracking [Election Litigation](#) related to the 2020 presidential election.
- Senator Cory Booker and Tiffany Muller provide policy suggestions for [How the Next Congress Can Improve U.S. Elections and Protect Voting Rights](#).
- Congressman Mike Kelly explains why he and others have appealed to the Supreme Court to challenge the [constitutionality of Act 77](#). Proceedings and orders related to the case are accessible [here](#).
- [Over The Line](#) examines redistricting and its impact on communities.
- Ballotpedia provides an overview of [Redistricting in Pennsylvania](#) along with federal and state requirements for congressional redistricting, district maps and the political impact of redistricting.
- The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette spoke with David Thornburgh and shares why and how [Redistricting needs transparency](#).
- The Brennan Center published policy solutions for [Creating Strong Rules for Drawing Maps](#).
- 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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