

Leadership Profile of David Thornburgh, CEO of the Committee of Seventy

Benjamin Oh 20 January 2020



Photo Credit: Committee of Seventy

Amongst the impressive, eclectic collection of campaign pins for candidates, from former President Carter to Ross Perot, sits Committee of Seventy CEO David Thornburgh's entry into politics:

"Perry Countians for Gov. Dick Thornburgh and Lt. Gov. Bill Scranton, 1978"

1978 was a tumultuous time for Pennsylvania -- unemployment rates skyrocketed as the manufacturing industry collapsed after World War II, while urban hubs like Philadelphia were bankrupted by the suburbanization of the middle class. 1978 was also the year that David's father, Dick Thornburgh, was [elected Governor of Pennsylvania](#). "I took a year off from college during the campaign and spent a good deal of time working on the campaign, where I was a surrogate speaker," Thornburgh

recalls, "it was [all] an incredible environment in which to grow up." The pin, however, reflects just one instance of the experiences that led David into politics and government reform. Indeed, David's childhood is filled with instances of political exposure, from his mother's advocacy organization work to his father's time as Attorney General, that prepared him to lead the Committee of 70 (C70), where he has served as CEO for the past five years. However, David mentions that above all else, his parents and his political exposure throughout childhood made clear that "we're put on this Earth for a purpose, other than getting by, and something other than just putting food on the table and enjoying the comforts of life." As CEO of C70, David continues to embody that notion of purpose and dedication, hallmarks of a strong leader, in his work to foster better government and empower Pennsylvanians across the state.

Prior to leading C70, David gained experience leading a host of smaller organizations, including the Wharton Small Business Development Center, the Economy League of Greater Philadelphia, and the Fels Institute of Government at the University of Pennsylvania. He credits his time at these organizations, and the individuals he worked alongside, with influencing the leadership style he now applies to Committee of 70. From his belief in "rethink[ing] your approach to take advantage of what's changed or what's stayed the same in [your] environment" to his appreciation for "the value of being nimble and relatively

lean... focus[ing] on the direction you're headed in and think[ing] carefully about how you can assemble a team to get you there," the credit is well-placed. These convictions, in preparedness, efficiency, and progress, help define the style with which David has led the Committee of 70. They reflect his decades of personal experience with a rapidly shifting political landscape, as well as the lessons from his colleagues, like the former director of the Wharton School's Entrepreneurship Center, McMillan's "discovery-driven" planning, which encourages planning over the limitations of a plan in the reality of an uncertain world. Equipped with decades of experience and concepts from numerous leaders in fields like entrepreneurship and politics, David has been able to propel C70's work through one of the most turbulent political eras and strengthen the organization's position as a leader in civic engagement and education across the city and state.

From focusing on solution-oriented programs to compiling a small, driven team capable of adjusting to unexpected challenges, David now leads C70 to adapt "in a very fast-changing world with complexities, where you never know what's going to happen." Since its founding in 1905, the Committee of 70 has, in one way or another, embodied these same convictions while pursuing its mission of fighting for better government. Indeed, its storied history includes successfully protecting mayoral term limits, reforming campaign finance laws, and strengthening

political ethics through instituting a Philadelphia Board of Ethics. Now, in the midst of the technological age and with political developments on the local, state, and national stage each year, David and C70's staff have been able to adapt efficiently to unexpected changes across policy and politics.

David's first major challenge as C70's CEO came in 2016 when "all of a sudden, when, on a day-to-day basis, people were learning about, talking about, questioning the really fundamental things about how democracy worked...what we do [became] much more important." C70 rose to the challenge, developing not only [robust candidate guides](#) and a [mobile application](#) for Philadelphians, but also implementing an idea that David humorously describes as former "beer talk," [Draw The Lines PA](#), an organization committed to fair election redistricting and community engagement. Together, the combination of voter education resources and new initiatives aimed at engaging the public with otherwise wonky issues continues to benefit residents across the state and drive public interest to produce tangible reforms. David describes these resources as tools for "communication and organizing and innovating... [i]t's like blowing on the embers to start a fire -- there's a glowing coal but unless you do something to take advantage of that, it doesn't really turn into anything."

Since David became C70's CEO, the organization has undoubtedly taken advantage of the current political

climate to add fire to the city and state's proverbial flame. Following the 2016 election, Philadelphia voter turnout has increased by tens of thousands, while Draw the Lines PA has engaged with and educated thousands of Pennsylvania residents across the state on redistricting, two developments in which C70 has played a critical role. Through avenues like Draw The Lines PA and the [Better Philadelphia Elections Coalition](#), which the Committee of 70 helped organize, opportunities for systematic change and improved elections remain within reach. In 2020, with new Pennsylvania election reforms, political redistricting after the decennial Census, and the 2020 presidential election, this couldn't be more true. Moving into 2020, David remains focused on continuing to reanimate the original spirit upon which the Community of 70 was founded nearly 115 years ago -- fighting for better government -- while adapting to meet the needs and opportunities that present themselves. Given his style as C70's leader, as well as his talented staff and the results they produced for the city of Philadelphia and the state nearly four years ago, they will undoubtedly succeed.

In the meantime, David plans for C70 to lead efforts focused on redistricting and additional election reforms following last month's legislation and the "virtuous cycle that can happen when one crack appears in what otherwise seems insurmountable." After the satisfaction of Draw the Lines PA's success, he believes that these reforms, however ambitious in the current political

climate, will gradually become realities. While opining on the rewarding milestones C70 has seen, David remarked that “the general theory of change in this business to me is like the way the tide comes in; the tide doesn’t come in all at once...one wave comes in and reaches a little higher on the beach than the last one...[and] as long as each wave is reaching a little higher and not the other way around, you take some satisfaction from that.” During his time as CEO of Committee of 70, including an increase of net assets from \$128,384 in [2014](#) to \$787,645 in [2018](#), the creation of new resources for voters statewide, and the expansion of C70’s programming, David has certainly prepared C70 to build on its mission and lead efforts to improve democracy for all, however gradual.

Author bio

Benjamin Oh graduated in 2019 with an MS in social policy from the School of Social Policy and Practice at the University of Pennsylvania. He also completed his undergraduate degree at Penn and served as director of Penn Leads the Vote, the university’s student-led, nonpartisan civic engagement and education organization.