

Opening Statement — Congressional Shadow Hearing on Election Protection

Widener University

Thank you, Congresswoman Scanlon, Ranking Member Morelle, and members of the Committee on House Administration, for holding this hearing at Widener University, and for the invitation to testify.

My name is Lauren Cristella. I'm President and CEO of the Committee of Seventy, a nonpartisan good-government organization that has worked to strengthen democracy across Pennsylvania for more than 120 years.

Today I would like to focus on three specific threats we have seen in recent election cycles, and how we respond to them at the Committee of Seventy.

The first threat is to the workforce that runs our elections. Thousands of Pennsylvanians show up, twice a year every year, to make out elections run. Poll workers have been harassed, doubted, and driven out at the exact moment we need their experience to protect voters. When that workforce thins out or shows up undertrained it can create the exact chaos that fuels the next round of "the election was rigged" claims. Every cycle, the Committee of Seventy and our partners at the League of Women Voters work to ensure Pennsylvania has poll workers who are trained, prepared, and confident before they open the polls. A well-trained poll worker is a firewall against manufactured doubt.

The second threat is the erosion of public trust in the mechanics of election administration. Distrust in elections is often fueled by a lack of understanding about how elections work. Our Election Academies invite the public into the process so they can see for themselves how our elections are safe, secure, free, and fair. Along with partners on the county level, we invite the public inside the rooms where ballots are printed, counted, and certified. They see the chain of custody. They see the machines that open envelopes. They see the redundancy. They see their neighbors doing this work in the open. You can rarely out-argue a conspiracy theory but studies show these efforts work to increase faith in elections—even among the most skeptical voters.

The third threat is that mis- and disinformation move faster than the truth, and they move through networks we don't control. Our response is WeVote, which we launched in 2019 to prepare the institutions people already trust — businesses, nonprofits, and religious congregations — to serve as reliable, nonpartisan sources of election information for their employees, members, and congregants. WeVote is now active with 275 partners statewide. Rather than trying to shout down disinformation, we arm

trusted messengers with regular reliable information they can share with their communities and in turn help voters know who to go to when they need information or hear a claim they don't think is true.

We all must be proactive in our efforts to increase faith in democracy. These are three responses, built before Election Day to increase voter trust and strengthen our democratic systems.

Here is what we need from Congress in response to threats we cannot handle alone.

First: exercise your oversight authority over the federal government. State and local election officials cannot do this work with one hand tied behind their backs — worrying about federal interference that undermines the very systems they're responsible for administering. Oversight is not a partisan act. It is your job, and Pennsylvania's election officials and voters need you.

Second: communicate clearly and directly with your constituents to counteract mis- and disinformation. You have a platform we don't have and you voters know and trust you. When false claims about elections spread — and they will spread — silence from elected officials is not neutral. It is a vacuum, and that vacuum gets filled by whoever is loudest, not whoever is right.

We are working hard to address these threats and build responses from the ground up. We are asking Congress to do the same from the top down. Thank you.