

# Operation Wildfire: Good Things Happen When YOU Vote

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Issue 19

## Race in the Spotlight: PA 171st Legislative District

### **The District**

The 171<sup>st</sup> Legislative District includes parts of Centre County and Mifflin County.

In Centre County, the district includes the Boroughs of Bellefonte, Centre Hall and Millheim. The Townships of Gregg, Haines, Miles, Penn, Potter, Spring, Union and Walker are also included in the 171st District.

In Mifflin County, the district includes the Boroughs of Newton Hamilton, McVeytown, Kistler, Juniata Terrace and Lewistown. The Townships of Armagh, Bratton, Brown, Granville, Menno, Oliver and Wayne are included in the 171<sup>st</sup> District.

### **The Candidates**

The Incumbent: Representative Kerry Benninghoff (R)      The Challenger: Robert Ziegler (D)

Let's begin with the incumbent, **State Representative Kerry Benninghoff**

**<https://www.kerrybenninghoff.com/>**

Representing the 171st Legislative District, Benninghoff has served in the legislature since 1997. He was elected by his colleagues in June 2020 to serve as Majority Leader. As Majority Leader, Rep. Benninghoff is in charge of the chamber's daily legislative operations, presides over party caucuses, schedules daily legislative calendars, directs his party strategy, assembles party members for important votes and serves as a party spokesperson. He also serves as Chair of the Rules Committee and is a member of the Committee on Committees.

Prior to serving as Majority Leader, Rep. Benninghoff served on the Leadership team as Majority Whip and for two terms as the House Majority Policy Committee Chairman. He served as Chairman of the House Majority Finance and State Government Committees. He is the founder and former Chairman of the bipartisan, bicameral Cancer Caucus that has worked to secure funding for pediatric cancer research and raise and advocate for cancer-related policy issues at the state level. He has also championed legislative and community efforts that support people with intellectual disabilities.

Rep. Benninghoff enjoys an excellent reputation for constituent services, not only responding to individual requests but reaching out and initiating contact with those he represents about services and issues important to them.

Prior to being elected to represent the 171st, he worked in construction, cared for patients as a hospital orderly and served Centre County for two terms as County Coroner. Rep. Benninghoff graduated from State College Area High School, later attending The Pennsylvania State University. He is a graduate of the Certified Coroners Training Program conducted in Hershey by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. He resides in Bellefonte and is the father of five children – Michael, Heather, Amy, Kelley and Ryleigh.

### **On The Issues**

Rep. Benninghoff believes government should improve the lives of those it serves; recognizing that every dollar government spends was taken from someone who worked hard to earn it.

He believes taxes should be low and works hard to ensure taxpayer dollars are spent wisely. He is a watchdog for government waste, a longtime advocate for greater transparency and supporter of government reform.

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Benninghoff is passionate about cancer research and other healthcare initiatives, ensuring an educational system that gives our children a clear path to good-paying careers, being a voice for victims of crime, as well as standing up for seniors while building a better future for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Rep. Benninghoff was the author of landmark legislation that gives children born in Pennsylvania and subsequently placed for adoption the ability to obtain a copy of their original birth certificate. He also wrote the legislation that ended Governor Wolf's Covid-19 emergency powers.

## **Session Accomplishments (As of 8/17/2022)**

- Stood up for individual liberties – Passed Constitutional amendment limiting the Governor's executive authority.
- Protected the right to life – Passed two significant pro-life bills that ban abortion on the basis of Down Syndrome and protect the dignity of fetal remains.
- Cut taxes for job creators – Passed a one percent reduction of the Corporate Net Income Tax (CNIT), using federal dollars and the surplus to reinvest taxpayer dollars to create natural growth opportunities and community investment.
- Provided tax simplification and fairness for small businesses – Passed a seven-bill package of tax simplification and fairness measures to help small businesses, who bore the devastation of Tom Wolf's business shutdowns.
- Delivered on school choice – Empowered families with children in our most struggling schools by passing legislation to create a lifeline scholarship account so they can send their child to a school of their choice without financial restriction. Provided historic funding for school choice in EITC/OSTC programs.
- Took on violent crime in our major cities – Passed legislation to term limit Philadelphia District Attorney, supercharge the Attorney General's Gun Violence Task Force to combat illegal gun use and possession in Philadelphia, and provided additional funding for law enforcement, prosecutors, and mental health services.
- Defended the Second Amendment – Passed Constitutional Carry that allows Pennsylvanians to carry a concealed firearm without obtaining a license. Passed legislation to further strengthen the prohibition on Municipal pre-emption. Gov. Wolf vetoed both.
- Enhanced public school transparency – Passed legislation to require transparency in school curriculums to empower families to know what their children are being taught.
- Defended human dignity – Passed a package of legislation to combat human trafficking.
- Restored confidence to our institutions – Passed the Pennsylvania Voting Rights Protection Act that protected voting rights through modernization, accessibility, and security. Passed bipartisan legislation to get dead people off our voter rolls. Got rid of Zuckerbucks from our elections.
- Delivered on economic recovery – Continue to limit the size and scope of government by making pandemic regulatory waivers permanent.
- Deployed COVID Vaccines – When the Wolf administration was fumbling COVID-19 vaccine deployment, passed legislation to get the National Guard involved to streamline rollout.
- Divested from Russia, Invested in Freedom – In wake of Russia's war on Ukraine, divested Commonwealth investments from Russian financial holdings and invested in energy infrastructure to make the U.S. and allies more secure.
- Delivered on significant regulatory reform – Examined waived and suspended regulations from the pandemic and eliminated dozens of onerous regulations. Advanced a Constitutional amendment that would allow legislative disapproval of regulations (SB 106). Rolled back Charter School Regulations, Oil and Gas Regulations, and fought against RGGI.
- Reasserted the power of the legislature – From taking back power in regulatory reform to reining in the governor's authority and investigating Larry Krasner, we have limited the size and scope of government while taking back authority from the executive to put it closer to the people and in its rightful Constitutional space.

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## Key Votes

Vote Smart tracks members of the PA Legislature. Operation Wildfire found a few of Rep. Benninghoff's key votes at this link: <https://justfacts.votesmart.org/candidate/key-votes/10176/kerry-benninghoff>

Along with the link to key votes, Operation Wildfire believes it's important to address two issues that continue to be raised: Act 77 (the bill that brought you no excuse, mail-in ballots) and the 2022 salary increase for state lawmakers.

## Act 77

### The Assertions:

Rep. Benninghoff "didn't do enough" to stop this legislation from moving forward. At the same time, statements are linked and mistakenly made that this legislation includes drop boxes, "curing" of ballots and an extended period to return voted ballots.

### The Facts:

Republicans didn't see mail-in voting as an electoral liability. The introduction of no-excuse mail-in voting merely removed the formality of listing an excuse to vote by mail. Unfortunately, once the legislation was passed, the Governor, the Secretary of State and the Pennsylvania Supreme Court started manipulating the actual rules and the way that Act 77 was implemented.

In June, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court found that Act 77's provisions for universal mail-in voting are constitutional. The Court did not address some of the "extra" rules that the Wolf Administration put in place which are not part of Act 77, including counting ballots that arrived late, the use of satellite election offices and ballot drop boxes. Challenges to those provisions have yet to be decided.

## The 2022 Salary Increase

### The Assertion:

Rep. Benninghoff gave himself a big salary increase this year.

### The Fact:

Salaries across the board will rise 5.6%, a figure tied by state law to the year-over-year change in the consumer price index published by the U.S. Department of Labor for mid-Atlantic urban areas. Legislation that would suspend the COLA in 2022 received unanimous, bipartisan support in a State House committee last year but was never considered by the full chamber. In the State Senate, a bill that would completely eliminate the annual pay raise has been stuck in committee since January. <https://www.altoonamirror.com/news/local-news/2022/08/pa-lawmakers-set-to-get-huge-raises/>

## Endorsements

Rep. Benninghoff has again been endorsed by the following organizations:

- PA Farmer
- National Rifle Association
- Firearms Owners Against Crime
- National Federation of Independent Business
- Pennsylvania Chamber of Business & Industry

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The Challenger: **Robert Zeigler** <https://zeiglerforpa.com/>

Robert Zeigler graduated from The Pennsylvania State University with a B.A. in Political Science. He completed his Master's Degree in Business Administration and Public Administration from The University of Phoenix.

He has over twenty years of experience in business management including employee training and development, employee promotion, conflict resolution, staff scheduling, following and enforcing HR procedures, budgets, audits and inventory maintenance.

Mr. Zeigler is a member of the Millheim Borough Council. He was elected by Council membership to serve as President of the Council from 2020-2021. Mr. Zeigler's website lists some of his accomplishments as including:

- Expanded holiday pay, vacation time, and paid sick time to part-time employees.
- Reduced Borough debt by \$80,000 for FY 2019.
- Expanded waterline project to maximize grant monies and prepare Borough for future growth and to reduce future costs. Saved over \$250,000 over initial estimates.

His previous employers include BAI Group, Inc., Macy's and The Atherton Hotel. He resides in the Millheim Borough with his wife and three children.

## On The Issues

- Overhaul the criminal justice system, including police reform, to build trust and make our communities safer.
- Raise the minimum wage to \$15 per hour, establish paid family leave and enact fair housing to lead to economic justice for all.
- Address affordability and accessibility of healthcare services to ensure healthcare justice.
- Lead in rebuilding Pennsylvania's economy to preserve the environment without leaving those who depend on the old infrastructure jobs.
- Protect our right to vote, increase transparency in our government, eliminate the dark-money that floods our campaigns and stop politicians from spending lobbyist cash on personal luxuries.

**Wildfire Note:** Governor Wolf signed Senate Bill 982 that amends the Election Code related to third-party funding of elections and new grant funding. With the Governor's signature, outside money to fund elections is no longer allowed. With this amendment, individuals like Mark Zuckerberg, who invested \$400 million-plus to influence the 2020 vote in states and counties across the country, including Pennsylvania, would be unable to engage in similar efforts going forward.

## Endorsements

Mr. Zeigler lists the following endorsements on his website (<https://zeiglerforpa.com/endorsements>):

- AFL-CIO Seven Mountains Central Labor Council
- Teamsters Local 8
- College Democrats of Penn State
- Pennsylvania National Organization of Women (NOW)
- Moms Demand Action

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You've probably heard about each of the above organizations, but may not have heard of those below:

- Democracy For America – The mission of this committee is “to elect the New American Majority – people of color and white progressives.” The committee was established by former Democratic Presidential Candidate Howard Dean. AOC, Ilhan Omar, Rashida Talib, Stacey Abrams and others who share the progressive view have been endorsed by Democracy For America.
- Progressive Turnout Project – This political committee is committed to mobilizing the Democratic Party and defending democracy.
- Bold Progressives – Another political committee that promotes economic populist priorities: expand Social Security, debt free college and Medicare for all. This committee has also endorsed AOC, Ilhan Omar, Rashida Talib and others who share populist priorities.
- Political Revolution – This political committee upholds the revolution envisioned by U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders and also advances the progressive cause.
- Sunrise State College –The Sunrise Movement’s mission is to fight for a Green New Deal and climate justice.

Sources: Candidate Websites and/or Facebook pages, Democratic and Republican Party Websites and/or Facebook pages, The Express, Altoona Mirror, PennLive, VoteSmart, Democracy For America, Progressive Turnout Project, Bold Progressives, Political Revolution, Sunrise State College