

Extra Feature Story

New Congress Convened Amid Questions Over Senate Seats

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The 111th U.S. Congress opened Tuesday even though two Senate seats are mired in scandal and legal challenges, and several more are in flux as lawmakers move into the new Obama administration.

The majority Democratic Congress will be the first to work with President-elect Barack Obama on economic recovery and a slate of other important issues. Mr. Obama will be sworn into office on Jan. 20.

Senate uncertainty

Although work has started on Capitol Hill, the fate of several Senate seats remained unresolved.

President-elect Obama's former Senate seat in Illinois, which he gave up to become president, is at the center of a political scandal.

Illinois' Democratic Governor Rod Blagojevich was arrested in December on charges he was attempting to sell Obama's vacated seat for money or political favors. In most states, the governor appoints someone to fill an empty seat.

Blagojevich also is alleged to have demanded campaign donations and favors from people and organizations doing business with the state.

Despite an investigation into his actions, Blagojevich appointed former Illinois Attorney General and prominent black politician Roland Burris to Obama's seat. But when Burris tried to enter the Senate on Tuesday, he was turned away. The Democratic leadership in the Senate has said Burris will not be allowed to take the oath of office under current conditions.

In Minnesota, Democrat Al Franken, a comedian and former member of Saturday Night Live, appears to have beaten Republican incumbent Senator Norm Coleman by a razor-thin margin. Election officials said Monday that Franken won the election by 225 votes out of 2.9 million ballots cast.

But Coleman has promised to file a lawsuit that could keep the race outcome up in the air for weeks.

Other seats are in flux: New York Senator Hillary Clinton is expected to be Obama's Secretary of State, Delaware Senator Joe Biden's seat will open when he is sworn in as vice president on Jan. 20, and Colorado Senator Ken Salazar is expected to be Obama's Secretary of the Interior.

The governors of those states will choose replacements.

Congressional basics

The U.S. Congress is a bicameral legislature with 535 members -- 100 in the Senate and 435 in the House -- and serves as the legislative branch of the federal government,

making laws, controlling the federal budget, and approving the president's Cabinet nominees, among other duties.

In the House of Representatives, each state has a different numbers of representatives based on how many people live there. For example, California has 55 representatives, while North Dakota has three. Members of the House face re-election every two years.

In the Senate, each state has two senators no matter what the size of its population is. Senators serve six-year terms, which are staggered. One-third of the Senate is re-elected every two years.

The current Congress is the 111th since the nation's founding and it will last until January 2011. The Democratic Party has a majority of the seats in the House and Senate, which means they have more control over which laws are voted on and pass.

Presidents can veto laws, but Congress can then take up the legislative proposals again.

Full plate

One of the top issues for the new Congress is the economic crisis. The United States is in a recession, a deep slowdown in economic activity, and Mr. Obama has said he wants Congress to address the problem immediately.

President-elect Obama is calling for a stimulus plan, which would cost as much as \$800 billion, to help keep the economy running as hundreds of thousands of Americans lose their jobs.

An earlier \$150 billion economic stimulus package passed early last year and a \$700 billion financial rescue plan for banks and businesses was passed in the fall.

Other areas Congress could tackle include the health care system, the development and use of renewable energy and changes to U.S. military policies in Iraq and Afghanistan.

-- **Compiled by Quinn Bowman for NewsHour Extra**

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