

Extra Feature Story

Democrats Reach Magic 60, as Former Comedian Takes Senate Seat

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After months of recounts and legal challenges, Democrat Al Franken has been declared the winner of the Minnesota Senate seat previously held by Republican Norm Coleman, after the Minnesota Supreme Court rejected Coleman's legal appeal and he resigned from the race.

Although the voting for the Minnesota Senate seat was over in November 2008, the result of the election remained in question until this week because the outcome was so close.

The final tally had Franken, a former "Saturday Night Live" cast member and writer, ahead by just 312 votes out of 2.9 million cast.

The Franken win gives Democrats in the U.S. Senate 60 votes, which means they can prevent the Republicans from filibustering bills – an important stalling tactic that can stop bills from becoming law.

Long wait is finally over

Although it appeared Franken had slightly more votes for several months, Coleman's team, funded by the national Republican Party, fought the election results in court by challenging the status of certain ballots.

For months, legal teams for Franken and Coleman contested the vote tallies and fought over which ballots counted and which did not. The Minnesota Supreme Court decided June 30 that the vote tally was legal and that Franken had won more votes than Coleman.

"I'm so excited to finally be able to get to work for the people of Minnesota," Franken said after Coleman conceded the race. "I can't wait to get started."

Potential big impact on national politics

While U.S. Senator is one of the most powerful positions in American politics, the Franken vs. Coleman race had special impact because a Franken victory would mean that the Democrats would have 60 members in the Senate.

This 60-seat level makes it easier for the Democrats to pass bills to be signed by President Barack Obama even if they have no support from Senate Republicans. The Democrats control the other half of Congress, the House of Representatives, by a wide margin.

Although there will now be technically 60 Democrats in the Senate, it will likely be very difficult for the party to get 60 Democrats to vote the same way on a bill, the Hotline's Amy Walter told the NewsHour.

"When is 60 not really 60? Sixty is not sixty when there are two Democratic senators, Senator Kennedy and Senator Byrd, who have not been a very active presence in Washington recently. They both are ill," Walter said.

Also, one of the Senate's newest Democrats, Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, was a Republican until a few months ago when he switched parties. He has promised not to be "an automatic 60th vote" for Democrats.

In addition, not all Democrats agree on all issues – like health care and climate change – so it could still be difficult to get bills passed without any Republican help.

Franken a celebrity senator

Franken was a well-known comic and radio host before he started his political career. Senator James Inhofe, a Republican from Oklahoma, has already called him a "clown."

Eric Black of MinnPost.com told the NewsHour that he doesn't think Franken will be an average senator because of his background.

"He was a comedian. He was a radio talk show host. He was very aggressive and argumentative in some of those roles. And now he's pledging to be someone who can work across party lines," Black said.

"And, you know, he won't have to face the voters of Minnesota for five-and-a-half years. We'll see what they think of his personality when his turn comes around."

-- Compiled by Quinn Bowman for NewsHour Extra

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