

Using NewsHour Extra Feature Stories

STORY

Democrats Reach Magic 60, as Former Comedian Takes Senate Seat, 07/02/09

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/features/us/july-dec09/franken_07-02.html

Estimated Time: One 45-minute class period with possible extension

[Student Worksheet](#) (reading comprehension and discussion questions without answers)

PROCEDURE

1. WARM UP

Use initiating questions to introduce the topic and find out how much your students know.

2. MAIN ACTIVITY

Have students read NewsHour Extra's feature story and answer the reading comprehension and discussion questions on the student handout.

3. DISCUSSION

Use discussion questions to encourage students to think about how the issues outlined in the story affect their lives and express and debate different opinions.

INITIATING QUESTIONS

1. Name the two houses of Congress and how their members are elected.

2. How many senators are there? Can you name the senators from your state?

READING COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS – [Student Worksheet](#)

1. When was the Minnesota Senatorial election?

The voting for the Minnesota Senate seat was over in November 2008.

2. Why has it taken so long to seat Senator Al Franken?

The result of the election remained in question until this week because the outcome was so close. The Minnesota Supreme Court decided June 30 that the vote tally was legal and that Franken had won more votes than Coleman.

3. What is the importance of the Minnesota Senate seat to the Democrats in Congress?

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.

4. How did former Senator Coleman challenge the vote?

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.

5. Which party controls the Senate now?

This 60-seat level makes it easier for the Democrats to pass bills in the Senate even if they have no support from Senate Republicans.

6. Which party controls the House of Representative?

The Democrats control the other half of Congress, the House of Representatives, by a wide margin.

7. Why might the Democratic Party still not get everything they want?

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.

8. Before becoming Senator what was Al Franken's previous career?

Franken was a well-known comic and radio host before he started his political career.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (more research might be needed)

1. Do you think Sen. Franken's previous position as a comedian helped him or hindered him as he ran for office? Do you think it could help him in his work?

2. Because some votes were challenged by both candidates the final verdict took months, can you think of an easier way to guarantee voting in the United States?

3. Look at recent coverage of other democratic elections (India, Iran, etc) and compare that election to the election in Minnesota; what are the similarities or differences?

Extension Activity

Have students write a 300-500 word essay on this topic providing clear examples. Send your completed editorial to NewsHour Extra (extra@newshour.org). Exceptional essays might be published on our Web site.