

Potential for Change in the Senate Recount

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The recount in the U.S. Senate race between Republican Senator Norm Coleman and Democrat Al Franken begins after a lively debate about what seemed like large changes in the vote count since Election Day and concerns of a “bias” that has unfairly advantaged Franken. Coleman’s lead has declined from a 762 vote margin on the morning following Election Day to a 215 vote advantage in the official count. Why are the vote tabulations changing? Why are they consistently changing in a way that hurts Coleman rather than being evenly distributed?

A study of the change between the initial vote count and the official results posted by the Minnesota Secretary of State’s results for the 2000, 2006, and 2008 U.S. Senate elections reveal four critical findings that may provide some perspective on the adjustments to the Coleman and Franken tallies.

- The change in 2008 between the “initial” count on Election Day and the official count was smaller than previous years. If the past is a guide, this suggests that the recount may change the final vote tallies by several thousand votes.
- The Democrats have consistently benefited from the changes after Election Day.
- If the initial vote count was changed by a similar proportion in 2008 as in previous Senate elections, Franken would move into the lead and by a larger margin than that currently separating the two candidates.
- Although there may be an assumption that a recount will increase the number of votes that each candidate receives, past Senate elections suggests that the vote tallies may actually decline. The tendency for vote totals to decline may be something to consider during the recount process.

The 2002 contest was not included; the extraordinary circumstances of that race disrupted normal election administration. Due to the untimely death of Senator Paul Wellstone, separate ballots were prepared and then hand counted.

2008 Recalculation of Initial Vote Count Comparatively Low

Although there has been enormous attention devoted to what appears to be large changes in the vote totals in the 2008 U.S. Senate race, these changes are actually smaller than in previous Senate contests. The change in the vote count between Election Day and the official

count was twice as large in 2000 and 2006 than in 2008. Table 1 shows that the official tabulation was changed by 3,440 votes (.145% of the initial vote count) after subtracting over-counted votes for Rod Grams and Jim Gibson and including the undercounted votes for Mark Dayton. In 2006, the totals changed by 4,240 votes (.194%). By contrast, the change in 2008 is half as large in proportional terms – a 2,154 vote change or .075% of the initial vote total.

Table 1. Candidate Changes and Total Absolute Changes

	Initial Count	Official Count	Change
2000			
Dayton	1,180,659	1,181,553	+ 894 (.076%)
Grams	1,048,949	1,047,474	- 1,475 (-.141%)
Gibson	141,654	140,583	- 1,071 (-.756%)
Total Absolute Change			3,440 (.145%)
2006			
Klobuchar	1,279,514	1,278,849	- 665 (-.052%)
Kennedy	839,181	835,653	- 3,528 (-.420%)
Fitzgerald	71,241	71,194	- 47 (.066%)
Total Absolute Change			4,240 (.194%)
2008			
Coleman	1,210,790	1,211,590	+ 800 (.066%)
Franken	1,210,028	1,211,375	+ 1,247 (.111%)
Barkley	437,382	437,389	+ 7 (.002%)
Total Absolute Change			2,154 (.075%)

Note: The “initial” count is based on the earliest complete results reported by the Associated Press or Minneapolis Star Tribune. The “official” count is based on tallies approved by the State Canvassing Board (as reported by the Minnesota Secretary of State).

It is unclear why the change from initial to official vote count was smaller in 2008 than in 2000 and 2006. Better administration and more accurate voting machines may help to account for the difference. It may also be the case that the intense scrutiny of election officials convinced some to defer to the transparency and oversight of the recount process to verify the vote count.

Democratic Tilt in Vote Counting

Table 1 shows a pattern in which the official count strengthens the standing of Democratic candidates vis-à-vis their Republican rivals compared to their standing on Election Day. The Democrats in 2000 and 2006 improved their relative position: Dayton picked up 894 votes while his Republican opponent lost 1,475; Klobuchar lost less than a fifth of the votes that Kennedy lost. Given the concerns of bias by the current Secretary of State who is in the Democratic Party, it is noteworthy that the increased support for Democrats in 2000 and 2006 occurred during the leadership of Republican Secretary of State Mary Kiffmeyer.

Two points emerge in the 2008 contest. First, the narrowing of Senator Coleman’s vote lead from 762 votes to 215 fits into the pattern in the 2000 and 2006 Senate contests: Coleman gained 800 votes and Franken picked up 1,247 votes.

Second, Franken’s position has actually improved substantially less than would be suggested by 2000 and 2006 races. Hypothetical projections of the proportional changes in 2000 and 2006 illustrate the kind of changes that might have occurred in 2008 if previous patterns had continued: **Franken would have picked up 920 votes while Coleman would have lost 1,708 votes based on the pattern in 2000. Similar calculations based on the 2006 contest would have reduced Franken’s total by 629 votes and decreased Coleman’s totals by 5,085.**

Table 3. Projected Changes in Coleman and Franken Position based on past elections

	Change from initial to official count	Projected impact on 2008 initial count for respective party candidate
2000		
Dayton	.076%	+ 920 votes (.00076 x 1,210,028)
Grams	-.141%	- 1,707 votes (.00141 x 1,210,790)
Projected 2008 Net Δ		+ 2,627 for Franken
2006		
Klobuchar	-.052%	- 629 votes (.00052 x 1,210,028)
Kennedy	-.420%	- 5,085 votes (.00420 x 1,210,790)
Projected 2008 Net Δ		+ 4,456 for Franken

Projecting past shifts from initial to official counts on the 2008 elections is strictly hypothetical and suggestive of potential swings as the recount proceeds. Of course, a number of factors justify caution including the fact that the projections are based on two elections won by Democrats and did not include the 2002 elections won by Senator Coleman owing to its extraordinary process – the use of separate, hand-counted ballots following Senator Wellstone’s death.

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