

Democrats seek control

Run-off elections could lead to 3/5 majority

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Published: Tuesday, December 2, 2008

Updated: Tuesday, December 2, 2008

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Jarron Fetter was confused Monday. His cell phone screen flashed a text message from his friend in Macon, Ga., saying, "Make sure you get out and vote on Tuesday."

"I thought to myself, either my friend is an idiot or I have got to get a new cell phone service," said Fetter, a junior in military science at Howard University.

Fetter later found out that his friend wasn't crazy. Georgia, his home state, is holding a run-off election between Republican Sen. Saxby Chambliss and Democrat Jim Martin today because the Nov. 4 election was too close to call. But today's election has far greater political implications than before.

This race, along with another race in Minnesota, has recently garnered a lot of national attention because if both Democratic candidates obtain victories, Democrats would have 60 Senate seats—the three-fifths supermajority necessary to stop filibustering. Democrats currently hold 58 Senate seats, including the two Independents who typically caucus with the Democrats.

Filibustering is a senate rule used by political minorities allowing them to delay a vote by having one senator or a group of senators speak continuously on any topic. The only way to stop the filibuster is a three-fifths vote to close the debate.

In Minnesota, Republican Sen. Norm Coleman and Democrat Al Franken are at a deadlock in a ballot recount battle. Coleman is holding onto a small lead of around 200 votes.

"Coming into Election Day, I could have cared less about the Georgia or Minnesota races," said Jamie Baker, a sophomore in English at George Washington University. Baker said she now pays more attention to the two senate races than to Barack Obama's cabinet appointees.

"The fact that Democrats control the House, the Senate and the White House is very exciting, but if Democrats can stop the filibuster, then that is one less obstacle for them to do some good," she said.

Last month's election was not only a dominant display of power by Obama supporters, but by the whole Democratic Party, said Irvin Wakefield, a freshman in African studies at Howard. Democrats gained at least seven seats in the Senate and at least 21 in the House.

"I think a lot of us were hoping for a few more seats in both the Senate and the House," Wakefield said. "But both now have an overwhelming majority to help President Obama use his policies."

Wakefield expects Obama's tax plan, legislation on the War in Iraq and economic stimulus and bailout packages to be the first types of legislation the Democrat-controlled bodies will push through.

However, there is a growing concern from Republicans, Independents and some moderate Democrats over how the Democrat-controlled Congress will operate. Critics cite the lack of balance as a danger to the political process.

“The last time a political party controlled both sides of Congress and the White House, the PATRIOT Act and No Child Left Behind Act were created and passed,” said Clint Sanderson, a moderate Democrat studying biology as a senior at Howard. “It is good for the Democrats to be in control because bills America needs will pass easier, but it also means that some needing rework or a second glance will slip through. That is not good for our country.”

Makaylah Asante, a registered Republican at Georgetown University, said her family is extremely concerned about the power Democrats will have when the next session of Congress opens.

“The policies Obama has been saying are too socialistic for us,” said Asante, a junior in computer science. “Our hope right now is for moderate Democrats to side up with Republicans and try to shoot down the socialistic agenda.”

Others remain skeptical of the Democrats accomplishing anything, even with the majority. Denise Furrow, a sophomore in business at Howard, said politicians are “all talk, a lot of walk and even more balk.”

“I don’t expect much to change with Obama or the Democrats in Congress. A lot of ideas will be floated around the Capitol, but I doubt many of them will even get to Obama’s desk,” she said.

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Editor’s Note—Jed Layton is reporting from Washington, D.C., through the Hinckley Institute of Politics.