

Minnesota Public Radio News and Humphrey Institute Poll

U.S. Senate Race is a Toss Up: Anti-Republican Winds Help Franken, Coleman Bolstered by Swing Voters and Centrism

Report prepared by the Center for the Study of Politics and Governance
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According to a Minnesota Public Radio News and Humphrey Institute poll, the DFL endorsed candidate Al Franken is locked in a close race with incumbent Republican U.S. Senator Norm Coleman. Forty-one percent support Franken and 40% support Coleman, well within the margin of error (+/-3.6 percentage points). Eight percent support contending Independence Party candidate Dean Barkley.

The race is wide open with 11% undecided.

U.S. Senate Choice of Likely Minnesota Voters

	Franken	Coleman	Barkley	Don't Know/Refused
Likely Voters	41%	40%	8%	11%

The survey was conducted of 763 likely voters between August 7, 2008 and August 17, 2008.

Franken Propelled by Backlash Against Republicans

The closeness of the U.S. Senate race is a surprise given the extensive media coverage of Franken's problems regarding taxes and worker's compensation as well as his satirical piece in Playboy that provoked a backlash even among Democrats including Congresswoman Betty McCollum. This string of negative news coverage may have fatally damaged most campaigns in most election years. But 2008 is already breaking the mold.

Although Franken's candidacy has struggled, the 2008 environment and, especially, the backlash against President George W. Bush and Republicans has kept his campaign afloat. Put bluntly, Franken benefits from voter dissatisfaction and anger. Three quarters of likely Minnesota voters report that the country is off on the wrong track and half of these voters support Franken. Arguably, Franken could be generating even more support from the disaffected voter.

Coleman receives the overwhelming support of voters who are pleased that the country is heading in the right direction but these account for less than a fifth of the electorate. In an environment with satisfied voters, Coleman could well be ahead.

Franken Benefits from Voter Frustration with the Country’s Direction

	All Likely Voters	Franken Supporters	Coleman Supporters	Barkley Supporters	DK / Refused
Right Direction	18%	9%	80%	5%	6%
Wrong Track	77%	51%	29%	9%	12%

Franken is also benefiting from the backlash against President Bush. Two thirds of Minnesotans disapprove of the President’s job performance and Franken is getting the support of 57% of these voters. This is another area where Franken might have picked up even more support.

Coleman dominates among supporters of President Bush but this is a small part of the electorate. A more popular president would help the Senator.

Franken Benefits from Voter Disapproval of Bush Job Performance

	All Likely Voters	Franken Supporters	Coleman Supporters	Barkley Supporters	DK / Refused
Approval of Bush	32%	9%	81%	4%	6%
Disapproval of Bush	66%	57%	20%	9%	13%

Perhaps because of voter frustration with the country’s direction and strong disapproval of President Bush, Senator Coleman’s own approval ratings are below 50% -- a symbolic litmus test of an incumbent’s political health. Of particular significance is that Franken benefits from Coleman’s unpopularity. Of the 42% who disapprove of the Senator’s job performance, three quarters support Franken.

Disapproval of Coleman Lifts Franken

	All Likely Voters	Franken Supporters	Coleman Supporters	Barkley Supporters	DK / Refused
Approval of Coleman	46%	12%	74%	7%	7%
Disapproval of Coleman	42%	76%	6%	9%	9%

The overall sour environment for the GOP is reflected in the inclination of Minnesotans to identify with the Democratic Party rather than the Republican Party (51% vs 40%). Franken is getting a bump from the tilt in the Minnesotan electorate toward the Democrats, though it is not a large bump -- an unusually high proportion of Democrats are not supporting Franken (30%) and he is lagging behind Barack Obama among likely voters by 7 points (48% support Obama vs 41% support for Franken).

Franken Benefits from Democratic Advantage

	All Likely Voters	Franken Supporters	Coleman Supporters	Barkley Supporters	DK / Refused
Republicans	40%	7%	81%	6%	5%
Independents	10%	30%	36%	11%	23%
Democrats	51%	71%	8%	8%	13%

Barkley Hurts Franken Most

The environment could be hurting Coleman more if Barkley were not in the contest. He is competing with Franken for the angry voter who disapproves of Bush and sees the country as off on the wrong track. Franken is only winning 51% of Minnesotans who are concerned that the country is off-track and Barkley is a major reason that the Democrat is not getting even more disaffected Minnesotans -- he is drawing 9% of these voters. A similar story is evident with regard to Minnesotans who disapprove of Coleman and Bush: Barkley is diverting 9% of these critics -- voters that might otherwise support Franken.

Candidates Battle Over the Issues

The environment appears to be neutralizing Coleman’s advantage as an incumbent and as St. Paul’s Mayor as well as blunting Franken’s potential liability for lacking experience in government. The economy and jobs are the overwhelming concern of Minnesotan voters. Forty-one percent of voters single out the economy as the country’s most important problem, topping all other issues by more than threefold.

On Minnesotans’ top concern (the economy and jobs), Franken and Coleman are rated evenly in their ability to handle them. Voters give the candidates similar evaluations on health care, gas prices, and other issues that they rate as less important.

Coleman enjoys a 14 point advantage on handling terrorism (47% vs. 33%) but this is offset by the fact that only 6% of voters rank it as the most important national issue. It is worth noting that the much heralded threat of the Iraq War to Senator Coleman has not developed: the Iraq War, which half of likely voters singled out as their top concern in October 2006, has now fallen to 13%, and Minnesotans rate Coleman’s ability to handle the issue as comparable to Franken’s.

Franken credible on economy and Coleman Advantages Come on Lower Ranked Issues

	Ranking as Most Important Problem by All Likely Voters	Evaluation for Better Handling Issue	
		Franken	Coleman
The economy and jobs	41%	43%	42%
The war in Iraq	13%	39%	44%
Health Care	9%	42%	39%
Gas Prices	7%	41%	38%
Terrorism	6%	33%	47%

Education	5%	43%	39%
Immigration	4%	42%	36%
Taxes	3%	41%	43%
Global Warming	3%	41%	35%
Housing and Mortgages	1%	39%	39%

Franken is also being lifted by the enthusiasm of Democrats. More than twice as many Democrats than Republicans are “extremely enthusiastic” about the upcoming presidential election (26% vs 11%). Meanwhile, Republicans express muted or no enthusiasm: 66% of Republicans indicated that they are only “somewhat enthusiastic,” “not too enthusiastic,” or “not enthusiastic at all” compared to 45 percent among Democrats. **One key group to watch are independents who are decidedly lukewarm: 72% express muted or no enthusiasm.** Put simply, the enthusiasm bug may help engage and turnout Democrats but independents may be immune.

Democrats are Fired Up; Republicans and Independents are Muted

	Extremely enthusiastic	Very enthusiastic	Somewhat enthusiastic	Not too enthusiastic	Not enthusiastic at all
Republicans	11%	24%	39%	18%	9%
Independents	6%	18%	32%	22%	18%
Democrats	26%	29%	28%	12%	5%

The string of potentially damaging news reports about Franken and his salacious satirical work does not appear to have tarnished him as outside the mainstream of Minnesotan life. Equal proportions of voters view Franken and Coleman as representing the Minnesota way of life. In addition, they are both drawing equal proportions of support from those who view them as representing the state’s way of life.

Franken and Coleman Both Represent Minnesota’s Way of Life

	All Likely Voters	Franken	Coleman	Barkley	DK / Refused
Franken Represents Minnesota Way of Life	36%	91%	3%	3%	4%
Coleman Represents Minnesota Way of Life	39%	6%	89%	1%	4%

Coleman’s Strengths

Despite the generally difficult environment for Republican candidates, Senator Coleman’s strengths are helping his campaign and will be important to watch over the next few months.

First, Coleman has been more successful than Franken in unifying his party while also appealing to swing voters who are independent or have not yet indicated which candidate they support.

Coleman has the support of 81% of Republicans compared to Franken’s support of 71% among Democrats. A strong base is the foundation for a winning campaign and Coleman has been a bit more effective in mobilizing his.

Second, even as Coleman has enjoyed greater success in solidifying his base, he also enjoys an edge among swing voters. Among the 11% of Minnesotans who are up for grabs, Coleman is ahead 35% to 26% for Franken. A key question is whether Coleman will be able to turn out Republicans who are not enthusiastic.

Coleman Enjoys Edge Among Swing Voters

	Franken Supporters	Coleman Supporters	Barkley Supporters	DK / Refused
Swing Voters (11% of likely voters)	26%	35%	12%	27%

Third, Minnesota voters are a bit more comfortable with Coleman’s political views. When voters were asked whether they considered each candidate’s political views “about right” or too liberal or too conservative, more voters reported that Coleman’s political views were “about right” (42%) than Franken’s (33%). In addition, more voters viewed Franken as too extreme: 46% viewed Franken as too liberal compared to 36% who thought Coleman was too conservative. These results suggest that Coleman is perceived as a bit more centrist than his Democratic opponent.

Voters see Coleman as a bit more centrist

	Consider political attitudes of candidates:		
	Too Liberal	About Right	Too Conservative
Franken	46%	33%	4%
Coleman	10%	42%	36%

Franken Dominating DFL Primary

The decision of Priscilla Lord Faris to enter the DFL primary on September 9th was initially considered a threat to Al Franken. The MPR News and HHH survey finds that Franken is dominating the race and that the contest does not appear to be stirring much interest, which is good news for the DFL endorsee.

Franken enjoys a 23 point edge over Lord Faris (45% vs 22%). In addition, 25% of voters indicate that they did not know who they would support or refused to answer. This is more than double the number of undecided voters in Franken’s pairing against Coleman and the presidential race and may suggest that the primary is not stirring strong state-wide interest and therefore may not threaten Franken.

A particularly promising sign for Franken are the nearly two-thirds of Democrats who support him over his opponents. Turnout is particularly important for primaries, which often are

dominated by party loyalists. Lord Faris gets her strongest support among Republicans who are especially unlikely to vote in the DFL primary.

Franken Leads DFL Primary

	All Likely Voters	Franken Supporters	Lord Faris Supporters	Supporters of Others	DK / Refused
All Likely Voters		45%	22%	9%	25%
Republicans	40%	24%	36%	13%	28%
Independents	10%	39%	21%	8%	32%
Democrats	51%	63%	11%	6%	19%

Despite Franken’s strength, the candidacy of Lord Faris does reveal weaknesses of the DFL endorsee. Among the 39% of voters who believe that Coleman rather than Franken represents the Minnesota way of life, Lord Faris receives the lion’s share of their support – exceeding Franken’s support by 15 points (37% vs 22%). In addition, among voters who see Franken as too liberal, Lord Faris also enjoys an edge over Franken.

	All Likely Voters	Franken Supporters	Lord Faris Supporters	Supporters of Others	DK / Refused
Voters Believing that Coleman Represents Minnesota Way of Life	39%	22%	37%	13%	28%
Voters Believing that Franken’s views are too liberal	46%	29%	34%	13%	24%

About the Survey

This survey is a collaboration between Minnesota Public Radio and the Center for the Study of Politics and Governance at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. The survey was analyzed by the Center. The research team was Lawrence R. Jacobs (director) and Joanne M. Miller (Department of Political Science). Melanie Burns was the team's research and data analyst.

The survey was fielded by the Center for Survey Research and Analysis (CSRA) at the University of Connecticut, which has extensive national and state experience conducting non-partisan surveys on politics and government policy. CSRA called a sample of telephone exchanges that was randomly selected by a computer from a list of active residential exchanges within the State of Minnesota. Within each exchange, random digits were added to form a complete telephone number, thus permitting access to both listed and unlisted numbers. The sample was designed to represent different regions of the state in proportion to the number of adults living in each region. Within each household, one adult was selected to be the respondent for the survey.

Results are based on a model which adjusts responses according to the likelihood of a respondent voting. Likelihood to vote is based on the following factors: self-reported probability of voting in the upcoming election, voting in previous elections as reported by the respondent, enthusiasm for the 2008 election, and incorporates differential turnout levels in urban, suburban, and rural areas. In addition, the results have been weighted to reflect the number of adults in a household and the number of telephone lines reaching the household as well as the demographic characteristics of adults in Minnesota based on region, sex, age, education, and race. Our analysis indicates that 70% percent of Minnesotans who are 18 or over are likely to vote in November.

The distribution of party identification among Minnesotan residents in the full sample is as follows:

	August 2008
Republican	39%
Independent	10%
Democrat	50%

1,093 residents of Minnesota were interviewed by telephone between August 7, 2008 and August 17, 2008; the margin of error is +/-3.6 percentage points. In theory, in 19 cases out of 20 the results among Minnesota residents will differ by no more than 3.6 percentage points in either direction from what would have been obtained by interviewing all likely voters in the state. For smaller subgroups the margin of sampling error is larger.

In addition to sampling error, the practical difficulties of conducting any survey of public opinion may introduce sources of error into the poll. Variations in the wording and order of questions, for example, may lead to somewhat different results.