

Minnesota Public Radio News and Humphrey Institute Poll

Coleman Lead Neutralized by Financial Crisis and Polarizing Presidential Politics

Report prepared by the Center for the Study of Politics and Governance
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According to two Minnesota Public Radio News and Humphrey Institute polls, Republican U.S. Senator Norm Coleman's 9 point lead over Democrat Al Franken and Independence Party candidate Dean Barkely was neutralized by the extraordinary financial crisis and the resulting congressional response along with the polarizing reaction to the Vice Presidential debate on October 2nd. In the three days before October 2nd, Coleman enjoyed a 9 point lead (40 percent versus 31 percent for Franken and 14 percent for Barkely); in the three days after October 2nd, which included congressional enactment of the \$700 billion financial rescue on October 3rd and the polarizing reaction to the Vice Presidential debate, Franken took a 4 point lead (41 percent versus 37 percent for Coleman and 14 percent for Barkely). Franken's edge was within the margin of error of 4.8 points; the race should be considered a statistical toss-up.

Presidential Choice of Likely Minnesota Voters

	Coleman	Franken	Barkley	DK / Refused
Before October 2nd	40%	31%	14%	15%
After October 2nd	37%	41%	14%	8%

In the race for Minnesota's U.S. Senate seat, Barkley's support remains steady at 14 percent in both polls. The inability of the Independence Party candidate to capitalize on the controversial fiscal rescue of investment firms and the polarization of the two major parties raises the question of whether his support has hit a plateau.

The Senate race remains wide open in the face of extraordinary economic and political developments. In addition to the unusual volatility, a significant number of likely Minnesota voters have not chosen a candidate and appear to be struggling with whom to support. The erosion of Coleman's lead stems from shifts toward Franken both by some undecided voters and by some initial Coleman supporters.

The surveys were conducted of 346 likely voters between September 29, 2008 and October 1, 2008, and 418 likely voters between October 3rd and October 5th. The margin of error is +/-5.3

percentage points and 4.8 points, respectively. For smaller subgroups the margin of sampling error is larger.

Why Coleman’s Lead Eroded

Several factors undermined Coleman’s lead. First, **the bad economic news and frustration of Minnesotan voters is hurting the Senator’s re-election bid.** The proportion of Minnesotans who concluded that the country is off on the wrong track rather than heading in the right direction rose from the extraordinary high level of 80 percent before October 2nd to 87 percent afterwards. Among the growing number of voters concluding that the country is off track, Franken’s advantage over Coleman widened from 4 points to 13 points.

Bad News Boosts Franken

	All Voters	Franken	Coleman	Barkley	Franken Advantage
Voters Saying Country Off on Wrong Track:					
Before October 2nd	80%	36%	32%	17%	4 points
After October 2nd	87%	45%	32%	14%	13 points

Second, **the economic and political turmoil appears to be neutralizing Coleman’s advantage in being seen as more closely connected to mainstream culture in Minnesota.** Coleman’s 9 point advantage as best representing the Minnesota way of life before October 2nd disappears afterwards.

Coleman Loses Cultural Advantage

	Franken	Coleman	Barkley	Coleman Advantage
Candidate that Best Represents the Minnesota Way of Life				
Before October 2nd	29%	38%	17%	9 points
After October 2nd	35%	35%	17%	No advantage

Negative Ads: Disliked and Discounted

Nearly three quarters of Minnesotan likely voters (70 percent) from a dataset that combines both October surveys indicate that television advertisements for the U.S. Senate race are more negative than previous years and single out Senator Coleman for running more of them by over a 2-to-1 margin (48 percent to 21 percent). (This combined set of data, which includes interviews with 766 likely voters from September 29 through October 5th, indicates a statistical toss-up – Coleman with 38 percent, Franken with 36 percent, and Barkley with 14 percent.)

Coleman Seen As Running More Negative Ads

	Franken	Coleman	No difference
Running More Negative TV Ads	21%	48%	23%

But most voters are not penalizing the candidates who are seen as running more negative television ads. The ads do not change the candidate preferences of 57 percent of voter who report either that they do not detect a difference in the negativity of the candidates’ ads or that the negativity of a candidate is not sufficiently offensive that they would switch to a new candidate.

Negative Ads Make No Difference to Most Voters

	No Change in Support of Candidates	Less Likely to Vote for Negative Candidate	More Likely to Vote for Negative Candidate
Reaction to TV Ads	57%	41%	2%

There are 41 percent who indicate that they are less likely to vote for the more negative candidate. Because Senator Coleman is seen as going more negative than Franken, this might diminish his support. It is uncertain, however, how many of these voters are truly undecided as many may already be supporting Franken. Nonetheless, **even a small number of undecided voters could swing a close election if they penalize negativity.**

Enthusiasm Gap

Franken enjoys an enthusiasm gap according to our two surveys. Among Franken supporters, nearly three quarters (73 percent) are extremely or very enthusiastic about the elections compared to just over half among Coleman supporters (56 percent). By contrast, higher proportions of Coleman supporters appear lethargic – about a quarter are only somewhat enthusiastic and 16 percent are not enthusiastic. Barkley’s supporters are least excited.

	Very or Extremely Enthusiastic	Somewhat Enthusiastic	Not Too or Not At All Enthusiastic
Supporters of Franken	73%	19%	7%
Supporters of Coleman	56%	28%	16%
Supporters of Barkley	47%	31%	21%

Enthusiasm is a factor in motivating individuals to actually show up at the voting booth and cast their ballot. The current enthusiasm gap suggests that Franken may have more success in turning out his supporters while some of Coleman’s may be more difficult to get to the voting booths. The comparatively weak enthusiasm among Barkely supporters at this point appears to suggest that his support on Election Day may be less than currently turning up in polls.

Franken’s Struggling Coalition

Franken faces four hurdles in constructing the kind of coalition that Democrats typically rely on to win elections according to our combined dataset. His first hurdle is that nearly 4 out of 10 Democrats are not supporting him. Although Coleman is unifying a greater proportion of his base, 2 out of 10 Republicans are not backing his campaign at this stage. Barkley is drawing Republicans, a bit more Democrats, and a quarter of independents who make up 10 percent of likely voters. If Barkley’s support erodes among partisans in the coming weeks, Franken would benefit a bit more than Coleman.

Franken Losing Democrats

	Franken	Coleman	Barkley	DK / Refused
Republicans	4%	80%	9%	7%
Independents	24%	31%	24%	21%
Democrats	63%	8%	16%	13%

Franken is also struggling to build the kind of sizeable advantages among women and youth that are helping other Democratic candidates. While Democrats often enjoy double digit leads among women, Franken is essentially splitting this vote with Coleman while trailing among men. In addition, Franken is also splitting the youth vote, which has been breaking decidedly for Barack Obama and other Democratic candidates.

	Franken	Coleman	Barkley
Male	34%	42%	14%
Female	38%	35%	14%
17 to 29 years old	40%	37%	9%
30 to 44 years old	36%	40%	13%
45 to 59 years old	33%	40%	15%
60 and older	38%	35%	17%

Franken’s fourth hurdle is that he is seen as “too liberal” by 54 percent of Minnesotan voters. Although 18 percent of these Minnesotans reward Franken with their support, the Democrat is losing 82 percent of voters who think he is too liberal.

Franken Hurt by Perception of Being Too Liberal

	All Voters	Franken	Coleman	Barkley
Franken's political views:				
Too conservative	2%	60%	13%	13%
About right	32%	71%	9%	10%
Too liberal	54%	18%	58%	16%

By comparison, significantly fewer Minnesotans see Coleman as too conservative (38 percent) and a bit more believe that the Republican’s political views are about right (39 percent to 32 percent).

Franken’s struggles are evident in the often double-digit deficit between voter support for him compared to Obama. Franken trailed Obama by 7 points in our mid-August survey and by 16 points and 14 points in our two recent surveys. These results suggest that Obama supporters are inclined at the moment to split their ballot in the Senate race and vote for Coleman or Barkley. This tendency appears to be growing during the fall campaign.

Franken Lags Obama

	Support for Obama	Support for Franken	Gap in support for Obama and Franken
8/7/08 to 8/17/08	48%	41%	7 point gap
9/29/08 to 10/1/08	47%	31%	16 point gap
10/3/08 to 10/5/08	54%	41%	13 point gap

A Comparison with Previous Surveys of the Presidential Contest

Our findings are broadly consistent with recent polls of a U.S. Senate race election that has experienced remarkable events from the financial crisis to the extraordinary interest and polarization resulting from the vice presidential candidates. Our survey in the 3 days before October 2nd found Coleman ahead by 9 points, which duplicates the SurveyUSA finding of a 10 point Coleman lead. Our survey in the 3 days after October 2nd found a 4 point Franken lead which is statistically consistent with the Star Tribune poll, which was in the field as Congress was starting to handle the financial rescue plan and the Vice Presidential debate was conducted.

Pollster	Date	Sample	Coleman	Franken	Spread
Star Tribune	9/30-10/2	1084LV	34%	43%	Franken +9
SurveyUSA	9/30-10/1	725LV	43%	33%	Coleman +10

The financial crisis and the congressional responses to it combined with the historic debate between the vice presidential candidates may be producing significant turbulence in the race,

which may help to account for the striking shifts in our polls as well as the seemingly inconsistent findings of the polls by the Star Tribune and SurveyUSA.

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 samples were 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.

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.