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Democrats' supermajority may be illusory

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Having finally reached the magic 60-vote threshold, Senate Democrats Wednesday were already trying to tamp down expectations on what they can actually accomplish with their supermajority.

But with the affirmed victory Tuesday of Democrat Al Franken in Minnesota's heretofore disputed Senate race, Republicans argued that the Democrats' nominal "filibuster-proof" majority means they face all of the risks and responsibilities that come with sole ownership of the levers of power in Washington.

Both sides agree that getting the 60 votes necessary to break a filibuster on contentious bills in the lineup remains no simple task for Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, despite the addition of Mr. Franken.

"We have a diverse caucus and there's no such thing as taking any votes for granted," said Jim Manley, a spokesman for the Nevada Democrat. "We also continue to face a Republican Party that just says 'no' to just about everything that we try to take to the floor."

Democrats were trying to dispel the image of unchallenged dominance as the chamber prepares to tackle energy and health care reform, President Obama's two top legislative priorities.

Republicans, with equal fervor, have sought to assign sole responsibility for what happens next to the bolstered Democratic majority - suggesting that Democrats will risk embarrassment if



they fail to push through Mr. Obama's agenda or that voters will punish them at the polls if the policies turn out to be unpopular.

The Democratic caucus - which includes independents Joe Lieberman of Connecticut and Bernard Sanders of Vermont - includes a number of moderates, such as Sens. Ben Nelson of Nebraska and Mary L. Landrieu of Louisiana, who have not been afraid to assert themselves on key votes such as the \$787 billion stimulus bill or \$3.6 trillion fiscal 2010 budget.

And the caucus includes several members for whom regional interests trump party label, which makes passage of critical bills such as energy reform more complicated because of the interests of Rust Belt and farm-state Democrats.

Adding to the challenge is that Democrats have often found themselves without the votes of the chamber's longest-serving members, Sens. Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia and Edward M. Kennedy of Massachusetts, who have health problems. That means that, at least for the foreseeable future, Mr. Reid will continue to seek the votes of a few moderate Republicans to reach the 60-vote threshold needed to cut off filibusters.

"It's not like all of a sudden we're going to be able to jam our agenda through at the drop of a hat," spokesman Mr. Manley said.


"The problem Democrats will run into now is that they can no longer blame 'obstruction' by Republicans for delaying their agenda," one senior Republican aide said. "There's nothing stopping them from moving anything they want, as long as they're all willing to accept responsibility for the consequences of passing a national energy tax, government takeover of health care, more bailouts and running the auto industry."

Hoping Democrats overstep their bounds, the Republicans' Senate campaign arm is already seeking to put Democrats on the spot.

"The Democrats' 60-vote Senate supermajority ends the era of excuses and finger-pointing, and it increases the pressure for supposedly 'moderate' Democrats," the National Republican Senatorial Committee, the campaign arm of Senate Republicans, said in a memo targeting, among others, Democratic Sens. Blanche Lincoln of Arkansas and Michael Bennet of Colorado.

Congressional observers said the upshot of the Franken win would be to increase the power of Democratic centrists such as Mr. Nelson and decrease the leverage of Republican moderates such as Sen. Olympia J. Snowe of Maine in the bargaining over cloture votes on filibusters.

"For the overall balance of power in Washington, though, Franken's win is not the panacea for the Obama administration that you may have read about," said John Samples, director of the Center for Representative Government at the libertarian Cato Institute think tank.

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