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Committee Memberships Could Hinge on Recount

By Kathleen Hunter, CQ Staff

The unsettled Minnesota Senate race has slowed negotiations over committee membership ratios for the 111th Congress and that has some panel chairmen concerned.

One Senate Democratic aide said it was “highly unlikely” the issue of committee structures — Democratic members v. Republican members — would be decided before the new Congress convenes on Jan. 6.

Senate Environment and Public Works Chairwoman Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., said today that not having the makeup ratio settled could affect her committee’s ability to move quickly on climate change legislation and executive branch confirmations within its jurisdiction.

“As far as I am concerned, the faster I get my committee put together, the happier I am,” Boxer said, adding that Democratic leaders might bypass the committee process in the early days of the new Congress if the issue is not resolved.

“I would urge the Republicans to work with us and get us going,” she said.

Because of their election success this year, Senate Democrats are poised to expand the one-seat majority they now hold on nearly every committee. The question is, by how much? Will it be two seats more or possibly three? A win in Minnesota by Democratic challenger Al Franken over incumbent Republican Norm Coleman could make the difference.

Until the Minnesota recount is decided — which likely will be some time after the state’s canvassing board meets over the next two weeks — neither side has much incentive to yield ground on committee ratios.

Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., might be more inclined than his counterpart, Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., to push for an agreement this week so committees can hit the ground running on Jan. 6. But Reid spokesman Rodell Mollineau said negotiations between the two are not making much progress.

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