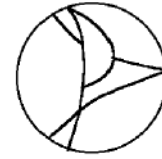


Community Matters

Specter Switches Parties

By: Patricia A. O'Malley



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Last week, Sen. Arlen Specter, D-Philadelphia, announced his switch from the Republican Party to the Democratic Party. This is not new territory for him. Specter began his political life in 1964 as a Democratic attorney for the Warren Commission, which investigated President John Kennedy's assassination. He concocted the single bullet theory, which rejected any possibility of a second assassin. Specter became a Republican to run for district attorney of Philadelphia in 1966. He was elected to the Senate in 1980 and many people considered him a moderate Republican.

The switch itself is quite easy. He only had to change his voter registration and notify Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nevada, and Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Kentucky, of his intentions.

The reason is simple, too. Republican Party leaders were angry that he voted for President Obama's economic stimulus plan. They refused to support his re-election campaign next year and threatened to make his life in the Senate very difficult. The Democrats welcomed him because it gives them a 59 – 40 majority over the Senate Republicans. Specter changed parties to keep his job.

A Minnesota court declared Al Franken the winner of the state's senate race in March. Incumbent Norm Coleman has appealed to the Minnesota Supreme Court, but experts predict that Franken will succeed. If he does, Al Franken will be the 60th Democratic senator.

Despite what the TV news commentators like to say, this does not give the Democrats a "filibuster-proof majority" in the Senate. There is no such thing as a filibuster-proof majority.

A filibuster is an obstructionist tactic used to prolong debate and prevent a vote on a bill. Any senator can filibuster on any bill at any time, although they are usually planned. The filibustering senators take turns speaking endlessly whether the topic is relevant or not. They're trying to change their colleagues' minds on the subject, or annoy them to the point where they drop the bill altogether.

Specter's move may make it easier for Democrats to end filibusters, but there is no guarantee. Senate rules require sixty votes to end a filibuster. That's called a vote for cloture. Most filibusters fall along party lines. However, every senator is free to vote as he or she pleases. So even with 60 Democrats, there is no guarantee that they will all stick together. In fact, you can bet that they probably won't.

Specter said that his move won't change the national political situation at all. It only gives him a better chance of keeping his job. If the Democrats want to see real change, they have to find a strong candidate to challenge him in the primary next year. Governor Ed Rendell promised Specter that he would have no opposition. We don't know whether there's a candidate willing to oppose Specter in the Democratic primary next year without any help from the state party.

To entice him to switch, Reid promised Specter that he could retain his 28 years of seniority in the Senate. Committees are extremely powerful in Congress. Many lifelong Democrats are unhappy that the move puts Specter ahead of them for committee assignments and chairmanships. Specter belongs to the Appropriations, Judiciary, and Veterans Affairs Committees.

But there's one more issue that none of the political experts has mentioned. Specter announced his switch on April 28. However, the state voter registration deadline was April 20. So there are three possibilities here.

First, he may have changed his voter registration more than a week before announcing it. If so, then why did he delay the announcement? Second, if he changed parties after the deadline, then his new registration won't count until after the primary on May 19 and he still has to vote as a Republican next month. Or will he choose not to vote? Third, he may not have changed his registration at all. If not, then does he ever really intend to do so? Which is it, Senator?

Whatever is true, it looks like there's something strange going on. Stay tuned.

For more information, go to www.senate.gov, www.democrats.org, and www.gop.org.

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