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Sen. Franken stops in Mankato, reflects at his halfway point

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MANKATO — Al Franken made a multiple-stop visit to Mankato Tuesday at the halfway mark of his term in the U.S. Senate.

Normally, the mid-point of a six-year Senate term would come in January, three years after taking office. Franken, though, got a late start and just finished his 33rd month out of the 66 he won after the prolonged recount following his razor-thin victory over Norm Coleman in the 2008 election.

When Coleman finally conceded and Franken was sworn in on July 7, 2009, there was relief from most Minnesotans that the endless battle, which went all the way to the Minnesota Supreme Court, was over. Republicans and Democrats found no consensus, though, on what to expect from Franken.

“Basically, he’s a professional wise guy,” Minnesota State University political science Prof. Joe Kunkel said of Franken’s pre-Senate career. “... Whether he becomes an endearing character or becomes unpopular remains to be.”

Kunkel also wondered if Franken’s sense of humor — largely hidden during the campaign and recount — would reappear.

“... Can Al Franken be funny again?,” he wondered. “Or does he have to keep being serious and boring?”

The former Saturday Night Live writer and performer didn’t make mention of his arrival this week at the 50-yard-line of his Senate term, but Franken was reflective about his first 33 months in office.

“When you win by 312 votes out of 2.9 million — and with 42 percent of the vote — really, you have a lot to prove,” he said.

And Franken had an opportunity not available to most newly elected lawmakers to carefully contemplate how to handle his debut.

“During the recount, I had some time,” he said, laughing.

He decided to talk to advisors of Sen. Hillary Clinton, another Democrat who was widely known before arriving in the Senate and another Democrat who was disdained by many Republicans. The advice?

“It was basically (be a) workhorse, not a showhorse,” Franken said.

During an hourlong interview with the Free Press editorial board, he was serious, issue-focused and mostly nonpartisan. And he said that's largely what he's tried to be as a senator.

Franken credited wife Franni for helping build relationships, via their spouses, with Republican senators — particularly Sens. Mike Johanns and Mike Enzi of Wyoming. And he highlighted bipartisan legislation and amendments he's pushed in partnership with GOP lawmakers on Wall Street reforms, insurance company regulations and diabetes prevention.

A recent rating by the National Journal didn't put Franken in the top 10 most-liberal senators, which might have surprised Minnesota Republicans who were convinced in 2008 that he would top the liberal list if elected. Franken finished 13th in the National Journal rankings, well ahead of fellow Minnesota Democrat Amy Klobuchar, who was 34th.

But Franken insists he's going to work hard enough and long enough to eliminate doubt about his motives and about his ability to represent all Minnesotans, regardless of party.

"I think everybody had a right to be (skeptical)," he said. "... But I think I've shown to them I'm working for them, I'm working for the good of all Minnesotans, I'm working so that they and their kids have a better life."

Kunkel, had he been sitting in on the discussion, undoubtedly would have found Franken serious. Boring? That's a subjective judgment, but here's some of what he wanted to talk about.

Franken is pushing hard to promote retrofitting public and commercial buildings to make them more energy efficient. The projects pay for themselves in as little as three years via reduced utility bills and can be financed privately with a little encouragement by government.

The retrofits boost employment in construction trades and manufacturing plants making everything from high-efficiency windows to software systems to reduce lighting costs.

"I said to my staff, 'We've got to figure out how to create jobs with no (government) money,'" Franken said. "... This creates jobs, saves energy and saves money."

He has an initiative to promote better teaching of science, technology, engineering and math in K-12 schools, saying those skills are crucial to America's economic future. And he's been working to connect manufacturers and technical colleges so that jobs in areas such as computerized machine tooling — left vacant by a lack of qualified workers — can be filled through special fast-paced training programs.

That will help manufacturers get the workforce they need, reduce the unemployment rate and lower the cost of higher education, Franken said.

Working with Republican Sen. Dick Lugar of Indiana, Franken amended the health care reform bill to include grants for communities to set up programs aimed at people with pre-diabetes. The programs, which provide 16 weeks of exercise at the YMCA and 16 weeks of nutritional instruction, have shown the ability to reduce by 60 percent the number of people who became diabetic, he said.

Franken's party affiliation was unmistakable several times — in his strong defense of the health care reform bill and in his sharp criticism of Republican Rep. Paul Ryan's budget proposal. He also showed his

sense of humor on occasion, as when he talked about his keen awareness of the need for improvements to Highway 14 between North Mankato and New Ulm.

He recalled a “harrowing” ride on the highway with former North Mankato Mayor Gary Zellmer, 18-wheelers repeatedly roaring past on the two-lane.

“I thought, ‘Maybe they just booked these semis to come and scare me.’”

Mainly, though, Franken appeared to be continuing his ongoing effort to demonstrate that he’s not the attention-seeking, hyper-partisan jokester that his opponents said he would be if elected.

“I have a lot of patience. I’m playing the long game here.”

Franken said he’s repeatedly been told by Minnesotans that they like what they’ve seen so far, that he’s exceeding their expectations. And to that, he often responds with a joke.

“I do a lot of ‘Thanks for having low expectations,’” he said.