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Cliffhanger or Blowout? Poll Positions on N.H. Race Vary

By Helen Dewar  
Sunday, September 8, 2002; Page A06

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What if . . . ?

It sounds far-fetched, but Republicans conceivably could take control of the Senate for a few weeks this year, only to see Democrats regain the majority in the new year. Here's how.

If former representative Jim Talent (D-Mo.) ousts Sen. Jean Carnahan (D-Mo.) on Nov. 5, he could be sworn in immediately, nearly two months ahead of the other senators elected that day. And if the current Congress reconvenes in November or December for a post-election "lame duck" session, the GOP would hold the slimmest possible advantage. With Talent replacing Carnahan, the two parties would split the chamber 50-50 (because independent Sen. James M. Jeffords of Vermont votes with the Democrats). Vice President Cheney would break tie votes in Republicans' favor.

Missouri's Senate contest is considered a special election because Carnahan was appointed to the office in 2000 after voters elected her late husband, Mel Carnahan, shortly after he died in a plane crash. Under Missouri law, a special election winner can be sworn in as soon as the results are certified. In normal elections, Senate and House winners are seated when the new Congress convenes in early January.

But there's another big "if" to the scenario. Missouri election results must be certified by the governor and secretary of state. The secretary of state, Matt Blunt, is a Republican, but Gov. Bob Holden is a Democrat. According to Blunt's office, the governor is not required to certify the results this year. That option could keep Talent from taking office early even if he outpolls Carnahan.

A Holden spokeswoman declined to comment on whether the governor would delay certifying the results of a Talent victory. She said Holden is

researching the issue and would do what is "appropriate." Polls indicate the Carnahan-Talent race is a virtual toss-up.

If Democrats lose the Missouri race but net one or more new Senate seats elsewhere this fall, they would retain control of the Senate when the next Congress forms in early January. Should all those ifs come to pass -- a victory by Talent, Holden's prompt certification of votes, a lame-duck congressional session and a Democratic majority in the new year -- then GOP senators will enjoy fleeting majority status.

Staff researcher Brian Faler contributed to this report.

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