[MUSIC PLAYING]

NINA MOINI: The race for the first congressional district in Southern Minnesota is still too close to call. Unofficial vote totals show Democrat Jake Johnson with a 323-vote lead over Republican incumbent Brad Finstad, so it will likely go to a recount, but Democrat Johnson is declaring victory anyway. Molly Castle Work has more.

MOLLY CASTLE WORK: On a drizzly night in Rochester, hundreds of supporters gathered in an event center to celebrate Democrat Jake Johnson's apparent victory. His campaign manager, Nick Martin, took to the stage.

MOLLY CASTLE WORK: It is my honor to introduce my high school math teacher and our next Congressman for Southern Minnesota, Jake Johnson!

[CHEERS AND APPLAUSE]

MOLLY CASTLE WORK: Then Johnson bounded onto the stage.

JAKE JOHNSON: This is not my victory. This is by us. This is for us. And you have been very clear-- bringing down the cost of living, tackling corruption and investing in Southern Minnesota again, that's what I'm going to Congress to do.

[CHEERS AND APPLAUSE]

MOLLY CASTLE WORK: The results still need to be certified and there will likely be a recount. But even if it doesn't hold up, Johnson exceeded expectations in the race against Republican Congressman Brad Finstad. Just two years ago, Finstad won the district by a wide 17-point margin. Johnson told the crowd that when he first started campaigning a year and a half ago, he was told there was no chance he could win.

JAKE JOHNSON: See, what their models can't quantify, what their punditry can't understand is the pain of a farmer at harvest time, filling up their combine with diesel that's over $6 a gallon.

MOLLY CASTLE WORK: Johnson campaigned hard on issues of affordability, and he attacked Finstad for his support of data centers and the war with Iran, and his votes to cut Medicaid and SNAP funding.

JAKE JOHNSON: What they can't understand is the challenge of a small town community when the clinic down the road shuts down because DC politicians chose entrenched interests over the people of this country. They can't understand it. But you know what? They understand it now.

[CHEERS]

MOLLY CASTLE WORK: Although initially thought to be a safe district for Republicans to hold onto, like elsewhere around the country, President Trump's growing unpopularity appears to have dragged Finstad down, and millions of dollars from outside groups poured into the race. Finstad hasn't yet conceded the race, and his campaign did not respond to our request for comment. But before all the votes were tallied on election night, Finstad reflected on his four years in Congress.

BRAD FINSTAD: I'm very grateful and humbled. It really sets in that, what an honor. What an honor to represent 750,000 people ir Southern Minnesota, and to walk up our nation's Capitol steps and go in knowing that I have a yes or a no vote on behalf of them.

MOLLY CASTLE WORK: Finstad has not yet requested a recount, but under state law, he qualifies for a publicly-funded one, according to University of Minnesota politics Professor Larry Jacobs.

LARRY JACOBS: The race is just incredibly tight, so there's going to be a real interest in the Finstad campaign to make sure that the votes were counted correctly.

MOLLY CASTLE WORK: Jacobs says a recount could take up to a month, but he said it's a very open and transparent process, with representatives of both campaigns watching as election officials examine and hand count every ballot.

LARRY JACOBS: It's very public. And each campaign is able to see exactly what's happening. Now, the hope is the result, then, is considered to be legitimate. The losing candidate doesn't feel like they were cheated out of winning.

MOLLY CASTLE WORK: Johnson's celebration may be premature, but Jacobs says leads in the hundreds of votes usually stand after the recount is complete. Molly Castle Work, NPR News, Rochester.

NINA MOINI: The first congressional district there in Southern Minnesota is not the only race that's likely going to a recount. There are also three races for the state legislature that are within a margin of less than a tenth of a percent. One in Moorhead split by just four votes. Joining me to explain more about the recount process is Minnesota's Secretary of State, Steve Simon, who was reelected on Tuesday. Thank you for joining us, Secretary Simon.

STEVE SIMON: Thanks for having me.

NINA MOINI: You heard our colleague there, Molly Castle Work's report. And this is obviously top of mind for a lot of people right now. When a race is this close, can you go over for us in some detail, what are the possible paths forward? It's not an automatic recount, right?

STEVE SIMON: That's right. That term gets thrown around a little bit loosely. Nothing is automatic. Every recount has to be requested by one of the candidates. What's different is that within a certain threshold of closeness, that requested recount can be paid for by the public, by the taxpayers. That's the difference. Really, anyone can request a recount, no matter what the margin is.

But these are the cases that you've identified, three very close legislative contests, where it would be within the rights of a candidate who looks to be losing based on the unofficial results to request that, and then the taxpayers would pay for that.

NINA MOINI: Mm-hmm. How does the process work? How long does it typically take?

STEVE SIMON: Right. Well, so the way the process works is there would be a request for the recount. And then that would have to happen within a couple days of a county canvassing those results, which is to say they certify the results locally. Then they request the recount. And what happens in the recount is-- it's really done on a county level. So take Senate District 4, for example, that spans multiple counties.

And each county would do counting in a central location in that county. So everyone can watch. Everyone can come in. You can record it, you can sit there and watch the proceedings. And there would be a hand count at one central location in each county. And there would be, obviously, representatives from each of the campaigns and the political parties. And then at the end-- and it typically takes in a legislative district one or two days.

And then at the end, the state would, in many cases-- in cases where there's a recount straddling a county, more than one county-- then it would be the state canvassing board, which I chair, that would certify those results. And then that would be the end, unless there was a contest afterwards. So any party can go to court and contest the certified results of a recount. And we've seen examples of that in Minnesota.

NINA MOINI: Mm-hmm. So we'll see what unfolds here with some of these races. I do want to talk about voter turnout. Minnesota voters, everyone's probably heard by now, turned out in record numbers, casting some 2.8 million votes, 64% of eligible voters. And more than a million of those voters cast their ballots early or by mail. Given these numbers, how are you reflecting on the future of voting in Minnesota? If folks want to keep up these numbers and continue to grow them, how important is early voting going to be?

STEVE SIMON: Well, I think the future looks very bright. Minnesota has upheld its long tradition of leading the country in voter turnout. We can't officially say that yet because we're still waiting on numbers in two rival states, Michigan and Maine. But right now, right now, the unofficial and incomplete totals show us as number one. And we hope that lasts. But really, we have a very good, healthy, pro-voter culture here. We have really good laws that balance access and security.

And you mentioned early voting. That's an interesting new-- relatively new phenomenon, really. And COVID in 2020 really accelerated that, which is to say that more and more people are deciding now to vote on a day that's not election day, either from their kitchen table or early at a place before election day. And I think that says a lot about people's preferences. They don't necessarily want to be told that they can only vote on a given day, during given hours in a given place.

NINA MOINI: Mm-hmm. I want to talk about just people's thoughts and feelings around voting and going out to the polls. Ahead of the midterms, President Donald Trump tried to exert control over state voter rolls, and falsely said non-citizen voting is widespread, and there were some fears about voter intimidation on perhaps election day or interference with results afterwards. Can you tell our listeners-- it sounds like there were no reports of anything serious that happened. How does everything stand today?

STEVE SIMON: I have to say, looking back on Tuesday and the days and weeks leading up to it, it was extremely smooth, especially given what you just talked about, some of the challenges and threats that we were planning for. That was never a prediction that they would come, but it was a precaution that we needed to take. Things went extremely smoothly on election day, aside from a couple one-off reports.

Our polling places were, as we always want them to be, islands of calm. There was no interference. There were no spots of trouble. Things went really, really well. And that's what you want in an election.

NINA MOINI: Coming into your fourth term here. I mean, that's so-- I mean, that's so many years. What are you still working on? What needs to continue to be grown in your role?

STEVE SIMON: Yeah, a couple of things. I look at the next four years, I look at the future as two things. It's defense and offense. Defense is that, unfortunately, I think we'll have to contend with continued efforts to have the federal government intercede where states are supposed to be in charge. So that's one thing, protecting the freedom to vote.

And then the other thing that we're thinking about in the future is evermore transparency. Right? I think when you can invite people in and show them the process, that really adds to confidence in the election system. And we have some thoughts and ideas, some in law and some not in law, about how we can bring more people into the process to see for themselves, to ask tough questions, as they always should, just to engender even more confidence than we have now.

NINA MOINI: Well, speaking of transparency, I do want to ask you about this while I have you here. Because a lot of people are talking about one of the biggest questions after the election of, who will be appointed to replace Governor-Elect Amy Klobuchar in the United States Senate? We have heard your name in the mix. Would you be open to that?

STEVE SIMON: Well, look, Amy Klobuchar just earned a huge mandate from the people of Minnesota. No question about it. We can call her Governor-Elect Klobuchar. And obviously, she has been our Senator-- and an outstanding one in my mind-- for the last 20 years.

So whoever is appointed will have massive shoes to fill. I just trust that she's going to do what's best for Minnesota. She's going to make up her own mind. It's a big decision. And I'll just leave it there. I have faith in her and I think Minnesotans do as well.

MOLLY CASTLE WORK: All right. Secretary of State Steve Simon, thanks for your time.

STEVE SIMON: Thank you.