

CHAPTER
12

Congress in Action

SECTION 1 CONGRESS ORGANIZES

TEXT SUMMARY

When Congress starts a new term, the House reorganizes because new members are taking seats. The members elect their leader, who swears in all the members. They then adopt their work rules and appoint the members of their permanent committees. The Senate does not need to reorganize because two-thirds of its members stay the same from term to term.

a tie. In the Vice President's absence, the **president pro tempore** presides.

Next to the Speaker, Congress's most powerful leaders are the majority and minority party **floor leaders**, the parties' chief spokespeople. They are selected during the **party caucuses**—meetings of the members of each party just before Congress convenes. The floor leaders help pass laws that their parties want. They are aided by **whips**, or assistant floor leaders.

Committee chairmen are also powerful in Congress. They head the standing committees that do most of Congress's work. Each is almost always that committee's longest-standing member from the majority party. This custom is part of the **seniority rule**, which gives the most important posts in Congress to party members who have served the longest.

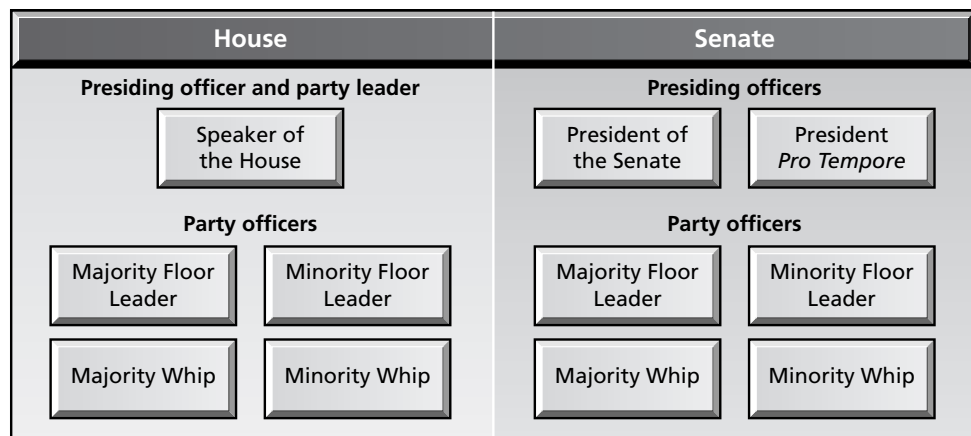
THE BIG IDEA

Congress carefully organizes itself to get its complex job done.

Presiding over the House is the **Speaker of the House**, who may debate or vote on any matter before the House. The Speaker is the majority party's leader and the most powerful person in Congress.

The Vice President of the United States acts as **president of the Senate**. The Vice President oversees the Senate's sessions but cannot debate and votes only in

GRAPHIC SUMMARY: Leadership in Congress



Leaders from the majority party have more power than leaders from the minority party.

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How does the seniority rule work?
2. **Diagram Skills** What two primary roles does the Speaker of the House play?