

Study Guide



Chapter 6, Section 1

For use with textbook pages 138–144

How Congress Is Organized



KEY TERMS

bicameral two-part (page 139)

census population count taken by the Census Bureau (page 139)

constituents people represented by members of Congress (page 139)

gerrymander an oddly shaped district designed to increase the voting strength of a particular group (page 139)

majority party the political party to which more than half of the members of both the House and the Senate belong (page 140)

minority party the political party to which less than half of the members of both the House and the Senate belong (page 140)

standing committee a permanent committee in Congress that continues its work from session to session (page 143)

seniority years of service (page 144)

DRAWING FROM EXPERIENCE

Who are the senators of your state? What congressional district do you live in? Who is your district's representative to Congress?

In this section, you will learn how Congress is organized. You will also learn how committees help to get the work of Congress done.

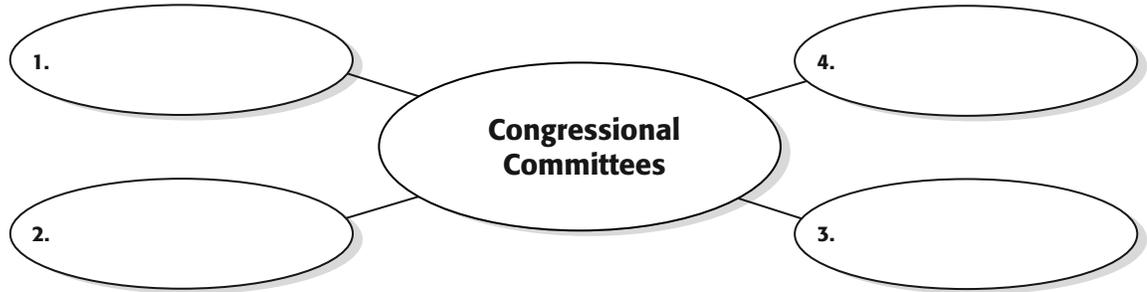
ORGANIZING YOUR THOUGHTS

Use the web diagram on the next page to help you take notes. Four types of committees help the members of Congress make laws and address various issues. List these committees and their functions in the diagram.

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READ TO LEARN

• Terms of Congress (page 138)

Every January 535 members of Congress gather in the U.S. Capitol in Washington, D.C., to make new laws. Congress—the legislative branch of government—is described in the first part of the Constitution. Each term of Congress usually starts on January 3 of odd-numbered years and lasts two years. It is given a number to identify its two-year term. For example, the 107th Congress began meeting in 2001.

Each term of Congress has two sessions, or meetings. The session generally lasts from January until November or December. Congress may also meet in special sessions during times of crisis. A joint session happens when the House and the Senate meet together, which they do to hear the president’s State of the Union Address.

5. How many sessions make up each term of Congress?

• A Bicameral Legislature (page 139)

Congress is a **bicameral**, or two-part, body, made up of the House of Representatives and the Senate. The House of Representatives has 435 members. The number of representatives from each state is based on the

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state's population. Each state is entitled to at least one member, no matter how small the population. The number of representatives given to each state is adjusted after each 10-year **census**. A census is a population count taken by the Census Bureau. Each state is divided into districts. One representative is elected from each district. Most state legislatures must draw the boundaries of the districts to include roughly the same number of **constituents**, or people represented. States can abuse this by gerrymandering. A **gerrymander** is an oddly shaped district that is set up to increase the voting strength of a particular group. Representatives are elected for two-year terms. They generally focus on the issues of their districts.

The Senate includes 100 members, two from each state. Senators represent their entire state rather than a particular district. Senators are elected for six-year terms. However, senators are not all elected at the same time. Only one-third of the senators are up for reelection at the same time. This helps ensure continuity in the government.

6. What is representation in the House of Representatives based on?

• Congressional Leaders (page 140)

The political party to which more than half the members of Congress belong is known as the **majority party**. The other party is called the **minority party**. Party members in each house choose leaders at the beginning of each term to direct their activities. The majority party of the House chooses the Speaker at a closed meeting. The entire House then approves the choice of Speaker of the House. He or she is the most powerful leader in the House. The Speaker steers laws through the House and influences most other House business. The Speaker is in line to be president if anything happens to the president and vice president. Speakers often listens to favors from House members. In return, the Speaker expects the representatives' support on important issues.

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The Senate does not have a leader with the same kind of power as the Speaker. The presiding officer of the Senate is the vice president of the United States, called the president of the Senate. However, the vice president rarely takes part in Senate debates. He or she votes only in case of a tie. The person who is actually the chairperson of the Senate is the president pro tempore, or pro tem. Someone from the majority party usually fills this position.

The most powerful players in the House of Representatives, besides the Speaker, are the majority and minority floor leaders. They try to make sure that the laws that are passed are best for the interests of their own political parties. Party “whips” help the floor leaders. They keep track of where party members stand on proposed laws. They also round up members for key votes.

7. What do party whips do?

• **Committees: Little Legislatures** (page 142)

Most of the work of both the House and the Senate is done in committee. Some committees are ongoing committees. Other committees are short-term and set up for a specific purpose.

The permanent committees are called **standing committees**. There are 17 in the Senate and 19 in the House. These committees cover areas such as education, veterans’ affairs, and commerce. Most standing committees are divided into smaller subcommittees, which deal with more specific concerns.

Both houses of Congress also have select committees. These committees do a special job for a limited time. The House and Senate also have joint committees. These include members from both houses. Conference committees are temporary committees that help both houses agree on the details of a proposed law.

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Senators and representatives who first come to Congress try to get on committees that affect the people who elected them. Leaders of the political parties assign members to the committees. **Seniority**, or years of service, plays an important part in determining positions on committees. The person who is the longest-serving committee member from the majority party generally becomes the chairperson of the committee. Chairpersons of the standing committees are the most powerful members of Congress. Some people question the role that seniority plays in determining committee leadership.

8. Who are the most powerful members of Congress?
