**How Congress Is Organized**

**BEFORE YOU READ**

**The Main Idea**

Congress is organized in a way that allows its members to consider and pass legislation without each member having to do everything.

**Reading Focus**

1. What are the terms and sessions of Congress?
2. How is Congress organized?

**Key Terms**

- sessions, p. 140
- caucuses, p. 141
- president pro tempore, p. 141
- whip, p. 142
- Speaker of the House, p. 142

**Taking Notes**

As you read, take notes on how Congress is organized. Use a graphic organizer like this one to record your notes about terms and sessions and the organization of Congress.

**CIVICS IN PRACTICE**

What if you had to remember to breathe, digest, and circulate blood? Your body is organized so that everything works together to keep you going. Similarly, if every member of Congress had to deal with every legislative detail, government would grind to a halt. To avoid this, Congress divides the workload.

**Terms and Sessions**

Under the Twentieth Amendment, a term of Congress begins at noon on January 3 of every odd-numbered year. The first term of Congress was in 1789. The Congress whose term lasts from 2005 to 2007 is the 109th Congress. The Constitution requires Congress to meet at least once each year. So each term of Congress is divided into two sessions, one for each year of the term. Each session begins on January 3 (unless Congress chooses another date). When Congress finishes its legislative work, both houses adjourn and the session is ended. In unusual circumstances, the president may call one or both houses back into a special session after they have adjourned. Although each house usually meets by itself to conduct business, the two houses occasionally meet together in what is called a joint session.
For example, when the president delivers the State of the Union address each year, all the members of the House and the Senate meet in the House chamber to hear the speech.

**READING CHECK**  
**Contrasting** What is the difference between a regular session and a special session of Congress?

**Organization of Congress**

The Constitution has only three rules about how Congress should be organized. First, it directs the House of Representatives to select a presiding officer. Second, it names the vice president of the United States as president of the Senate. Third, it calls for the selection of a senator to preside in the vice president’s absence.

Shortly after the first day of each term, the Republican and Democratic members in each house gather separately in private meetings. These private meetings are called party **caucuses**. At these caucuses, the Republican members of each house choose their own leaders, and the Democratic members do the same. The political party that has the most members in each house is known as the majority party. The political party that has fewer members is called the minority party.

**Organization of the Senate**

The vice president of the United States does not usually preside over the daily meetings of the Senate. Instead, the majority party elects one of its members to be the **president pro tempore**. *Pro tempore* is a Latin phrase meaning *for the time being*.

Each party has its floor leaders, known as the majority leader and the minority leader.
taken up by the full committee. Each commit-
tee and subcommittee has a chairperson, who
is a member of the majority party, and a rank-
ing minority member. The ranking minority
member is the highest ranking (and usually
longest serving) member of the minority
party on a committee or subcommittee.

Organization of the House
of Representatives

The person who presides over the House when
it is in session is the Speaker of the House.
The Speaker, who is always a member of the
majority party, is the most powerful officer
in the House. For example, no representative
may speak until called on, or recognized, by
the Speaker. The Speaker also influences the
order of business in the House.

The committee structure in the House is
generally similar to the committee structure
in the Senate, with about two dozen commit-
tees, their subcommittees, committee chair-
persons, and ranking minority members. The
names of the House committees are often dif-
ferent from the names of the Senate commit-
tees, but the basic organization is the same.

Each party’s floor leader is assisted by a party
whip. The whip’s job is to count votes, encour-
age party loyalty, and ensure that the party’s
members are present for important votes.

The Senate has about twenty committees
that consider legislation and hold hearings.
Each committee has one or more subcommit-
tees that may consider legislation before it is

draw Conclusions Why do you think Ros-Lehtinen supported the
Cuban Democracy Act?

Ileana Ros-Lehtinen
(1952–)

Born in Havana, Cuba, Ileana Ros-
Lehtinen immigrated to the United
States at the age of seven. U.S.
Representative Lehtinen became
the first Latina elected to the
Florida House of Representatives
in 1982. In 1989 Ros-Lehtinen also became the first Latina
elected to the U.S. Congress, as well as the first Cuban
American elected to Congress. As an advocate for human
rights and democracy, Representative Ros-Lehtinen helped
pass the Cuban Democracy Act, which seeks to improve the
lives of Cuban citizens. She is also committed to the effort to
preserve and protect the Florida Everglades.

Reading Check
Summarizing How is each
house of Congress organized?

FOCUS ON
Ileana
Ros-Lehtinen

Draw Conclusions Why do you think Ros-Lehtinen supported the
Cuban Democracy Act?

SECTION 2 ASSESSMENT

Reviewing Ideas and Terms

1. a. Define Write a brief definition for the term sessions.
       b. Draw Inferences and Conclusions
       What do you think are some issues that might cause
       the president to call a joint session of Congress?

2. a. Define Write a brief definition for each of the
       following terms: caucuses, president pro tempore,
       whip, and Speaker of the House.
       b. Elaborate Why does the majority party have
           an advantage over the minority party under the
           committee system?

Critical Thinking

3. Analyzing Use your notes and a graphic organizer
   like the one here to explain the structure of the U.S.
   Senate and House of Representatives.

Focus on Writing

4. Evaluate What do you think might happen if both
   houses of Congress are controlled by the same politi-
   cal party?