

Chapter 12: Congress in Action

Section 1

Lecture Notes



AMERICAN  
**GOVERNMENT**

PEARSON

# ► Objectives

1. Describe how and when Congress convenes.
2. Compare the roles of the presiding officers in the Senate and the House.
3. Identify the duties of the party officers in each house.
4. Describe how committee chairmen are chosen and explain their role in the legislative process.

# ▶ Key Terms

- **Speaker of the House:** the elected presiding officer of the House and the leader of its majority party
- **President of the Senate:** the Senate's presiding officer
- **President *pro tempore*:** the elected Senate officer who presides in the Vice President's absence
- **party caucus:** a closed meeting of the members of each party in each house
- **floor leaders:** unofficial party officers who serve in each house

## ▶ Key Terms, cont.

- **majority leader:** the floor leader of the majority party in either house
- **minority leader:** the floor leader of the minority party in either house
- **whip:** assistant floor leaders
- **committee chairmen:** the heads of the standing committees in Congress
- **seniority rule:** the unwritten custom that the party members with the longest records of service should hold the most important posts in Congress

# ▶ Introduction

- How do constitutional and party officers keep Congress organized?
  - The Speaker of the House and the presiding officer of the Senate settle rules issues and direct the flow of floor debate.
  - The majority and minority leaders and whips organize party policy and voting on issues.
  - The committee chairs guide the passage of bills through each house.

# ▶ Opening Day in Congress

- Congress begins a new term every two years, on January 3 of odd years.
- In the House, the members elect a Speaker, who takes the oath of office and swears in the other members.
- The House then elects various officers such as the clerk.
- Next the House adopts the rules for the current term.
- These rules have developed for over 200 years and are occasionally amended or expanded.

## ▶ Opening Day, cont.

- The House then appoints the members of the 20 permanent committees.
- Only a third of the Senate is elected every two years, so newly elected members are simply sworn in and vacancies for officers and committees filled.



# ▶ The State of the Union

- Checkpoint: What is the purpose of the State of the Union address?
  - The President delivers the State of the Union address to a joint session of Congress a few weeks after it is organized.
  - In addition to describing the general state of national affairs, the President describes the planned policies of his or her administration to Congress and the nation, requesting that Congress pass specific pieces of legislation.



# ► Speaker of the House

- The Speaker of the House is the presiding officer of the House and the leader of its majority party, a powerful combination.
- Democrat Nancy Pelosi (right) is the first woman to serve as Speaker.



## ► Speaker of the House, cont.

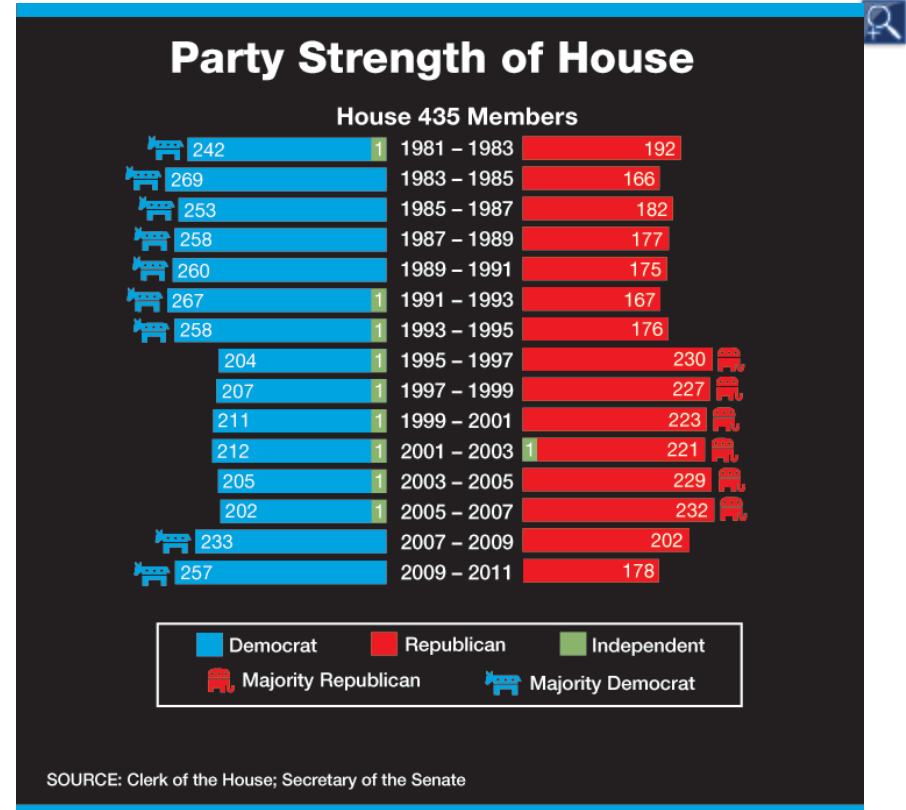
- The Speaker presides and keeps order.
  - The Speaker chairs most sessions of the House. No member can speak on the floor unless recognized by the Speaker.
  - The Speaker interprets and applies rules and procedures, refers bills to committees, and puts motions to a vote.
  - The Speaker also names the members of all select and conference committees.

# ▶ President of the Senate

- The Constitution names the Vice President as the Senate's presiding officer.
  - The President of the Senate can recognize members, put questions to a vote, and so forth, but cannot take part in debates and votes only to break a tie.
  - The President *pro tempore* is a member of the Senate's majority party elected to serve as Senate leader in the Vice President's absence.

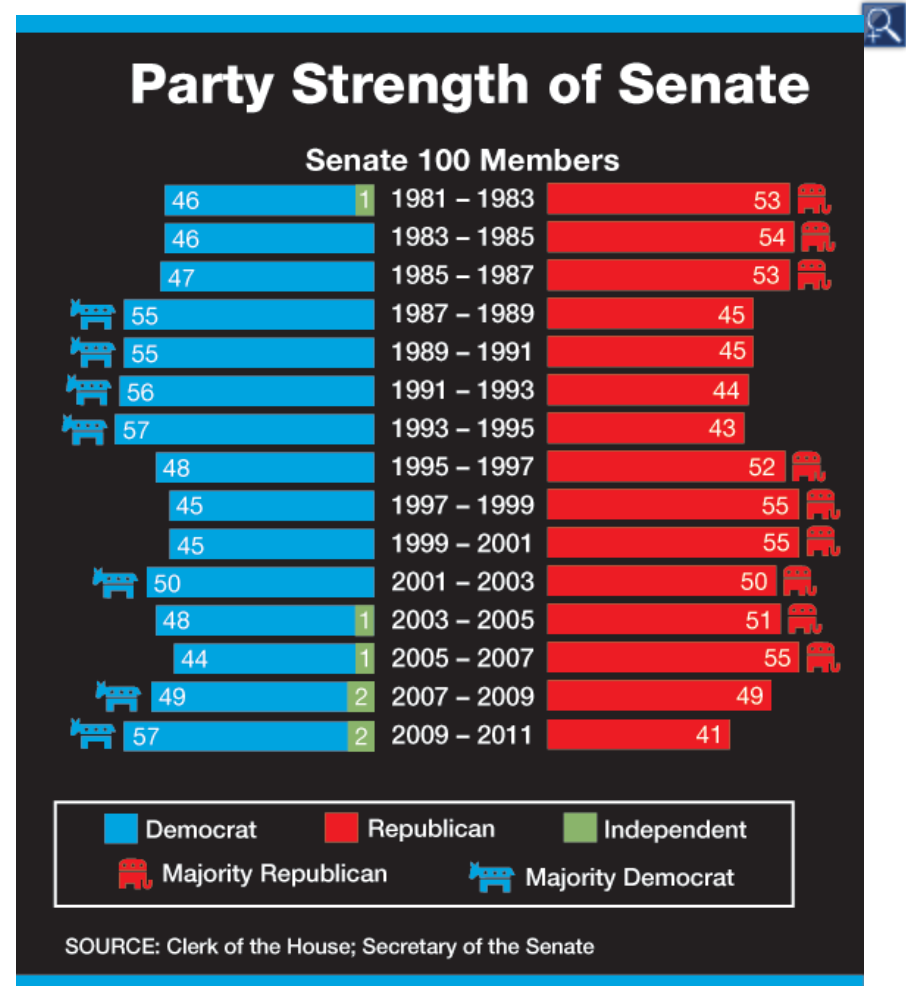
# ▶ Party Politics in Congress

- Congress is strongly partisan.
- It is organized along party lines, with key positions and committees controlled by the majority party in each house.
  - Since 1981, what is the largest majority held by either party in the House?

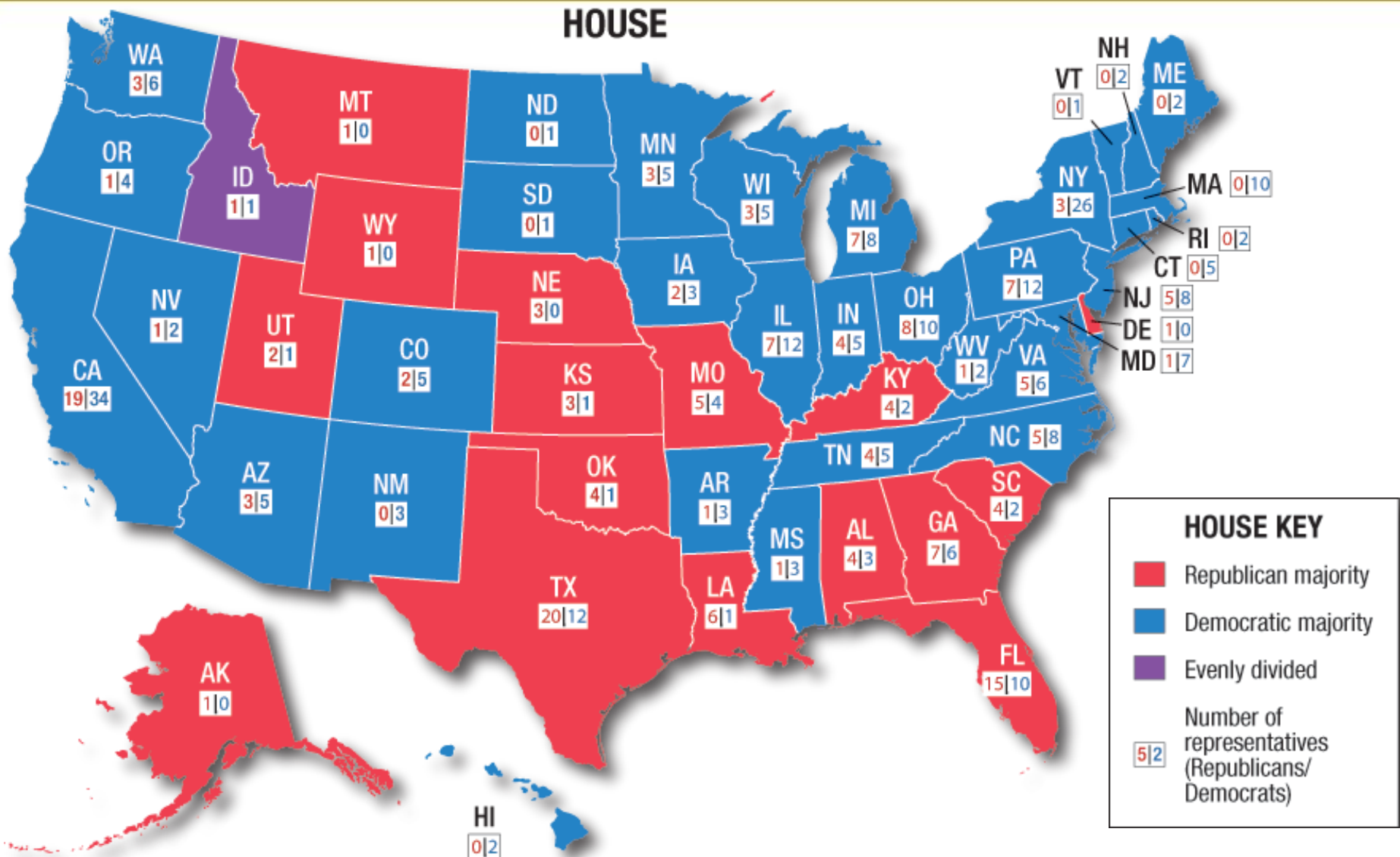


# ▶ Party Caucus

- Checkpoint: What is a party caucus?
  - A party caucus is a closed meeting of the members of each party in each house.
  - The caucus discusses policy issues and selects the party's floor leaders and committee chairs.

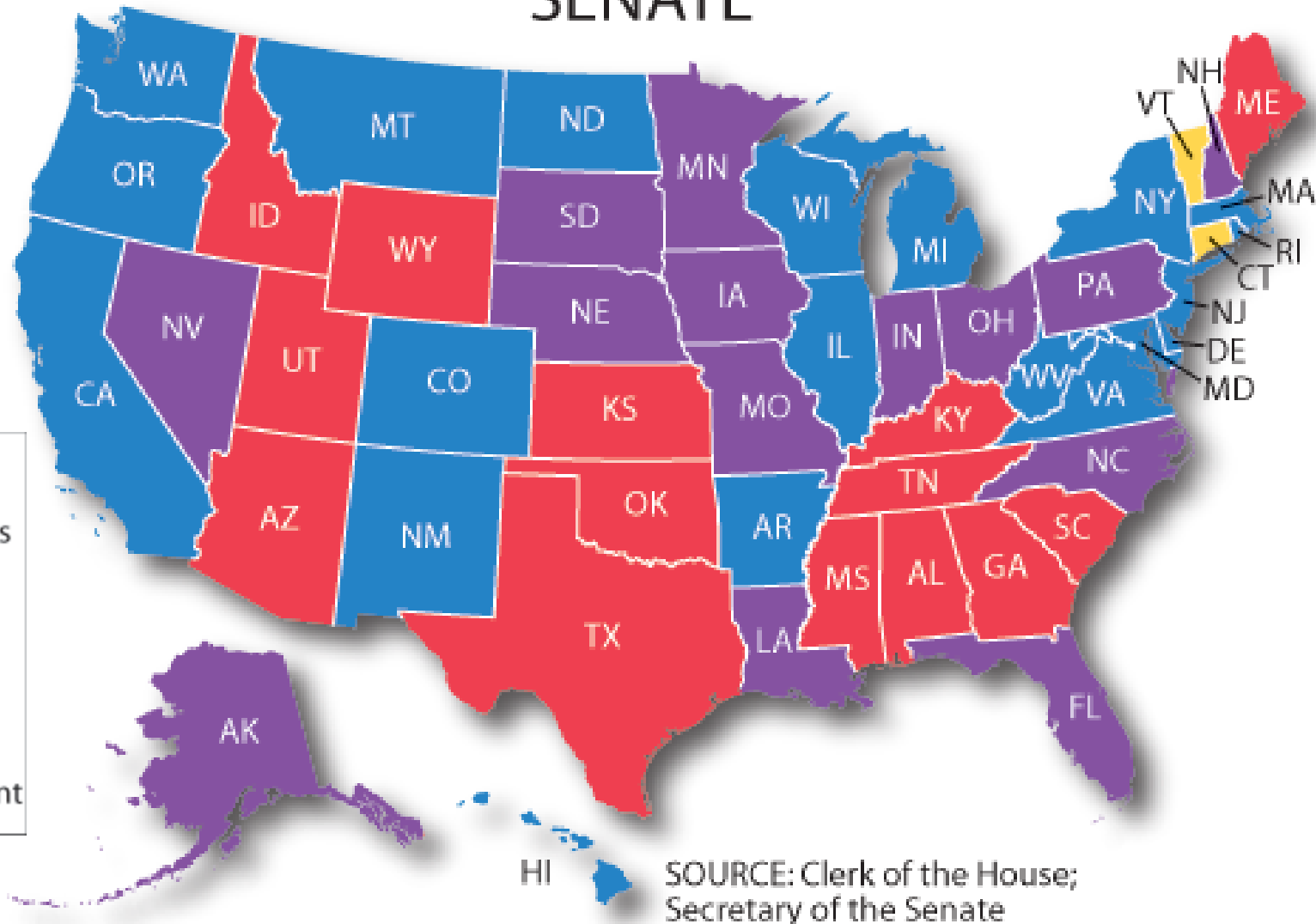


# Representation by State



# Representation by State

### SENATE



# ► Floor Leaders

- The floor leaders are party officers in the House and Senate.
- The majority leader represents the majority party in each house and controls the order of business on the floor.



The infographic is set against a blue background with a white outline of the U.S. Capitol building. At the top left, a green box contains the word "HOUSE". Below the building outline, the text "Presiding Officer and Party Leader" is displayed. Underneath, a portrait of Nancy Pelosi is shown next to her title and name. A horizontal line separates this from the "Party Officers" section. This section is divided into two columns. The left column lists the Majority Floor Leader (Steny Hoyer) and the Majority Whip (James Clyburn). The right column lists the Minority Floor Leader (John Boehner) and the Minority Whip (Roy Blunt). Each name is accompanied by a small portrait.

**HOUSE**

**Presiding Officer and Party Leader**

Speaker of the House  
**NANCY PELOSI**  
(D., California)

**Party Officers**

Majority Floor Leader <b>STENY HOYER</b> (D., Maryland)	Minority Floor Leader <b>JOHN BOEHNER</b> (R., Ohio)
Majority Whip <b>JAMES CLYBURN</b> (D., South Carolina)	Minority Whip <b>ROY BLUNT</b> (R., Missouri)



# ► Floor Leaders, cont.

- The party whips are assistant floor leaders who help connect the party leadership with the rank-and-file members.
- The whips count votes and help see that members are present for key votes.



The infographic is titled "SENATE" and features a stylized illustration of the U.S. Capitol building. It is divided into two main sections: "Presiding Officers" and "Party Officers". Each section lists two individuals with their titles, names, and political affiliations.

SENATE	
<b>Presiding Officers</b>	
 President of the Senate <b>JOE BIDEN</b> (D., Delaware)	 President Pro Tempore <b>ROBERT C. BYRD</b> (D., West Virginia)
<b>Party Officers</b>	
 Majority Floor Leader <b>HARRY REID</b> (D., Nevada)	 Minority Floor Leader <b>MITCH MCCONNELL</b> (R., Kentucky)
 Majority Whip <b>DICK DURBIN</b> (D., Illinois)	 Minority Whip <b>JON KYL</b> (R., Arizona)

# ▶ Committee Chairman

- Committee chairs have a major say in what bills the committee considers, if public hearings will be held, and what witnesses will be called.
  - What does this cartoon say about testifying before a committee?



# ▶ The Seniority Rule

- The seniority rule is an unwritten custom granting the most important posts in Congress, such as committee chairmen, to the party members with the longest service.
  - Critics say this rule ignores ability, discourages younger members, and limits fresh ideas.
  - Supporters say the rule ensures experienced leadership and is easy to apply without sparking debates.

## ► Review

- Now that you have learned about how constitutional and party officers keep Congress organized, go back and answer the Chapter Essential Question.
  - Can and should the lawmaking process be improved?