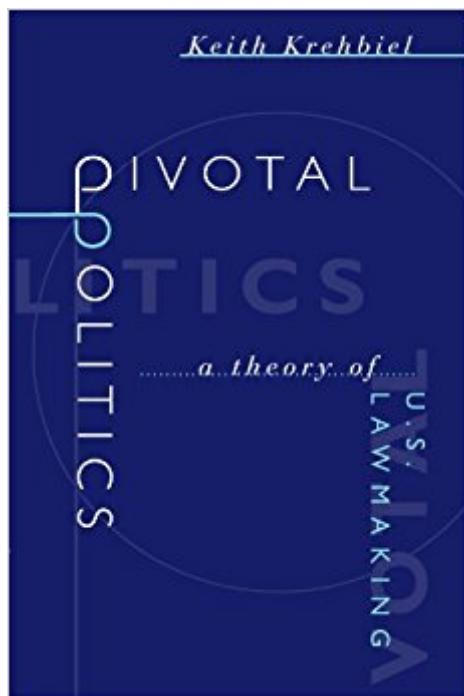


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# Pivotal Politics: A Theory Of U.S. Lawmaking



## Synopsis

Politicians and pundits alike have complained that the divided governments of the last decades have led to legislative gridlock. Not so, argues Keith Krehbiel, who advances the provocative theory that divided government actually has little effect on legislative productivity. Gridlock is in fact the order of the day, occurring even when the same party controls the legislative and executive branches. Meticulously researched and anchored to real politics, Krehbiel argues that the pivotal vote on a piece of legislation is not the one that gives a bill a simple majority, but the vote that allows its supporters to override a possible presidential veto or to put a halt to a filibuster. This theory of pivots also explains why, when bills are passed, winning coalitions usually are bipartisan and supermajority sized. Offering an incisive account of when gridlock is overcome and showing that political parties are less important in legislative-executive politics than previously thought, *Pivotal Politics* remakes our understanding of American lawmaking.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Politicians and pundits alike have complained that the divided governments of the last decades have led to legislative gridlock. Not so, argues Keith Krehbiel, who advances the provocative theory that divided government actually has little distinctive effect on legislative productivity. Raw political conflict is in fact the order of the day, occurring even when the same party controls the legislative and executive branches. Meticulously researched and anchored in real politics, Krehbiel's study shows that the pivotal vote on a piece of legislation is not the one that gives a bill a simple majority, but the one that allows its supporters to override a possible presidential veto or to halt a

filibuster. Krehbiel's tractable yet comprehensive theory demonstrates how a specific and identifiable decision maker determines final policy choices and how politicians who are trying to enact new policies focus their legislative efforts on these pivotal lawmakers. This theory of pivots also explains why, when bills are passed, winning coalitions usually are bipartisan and supermajority sized. Offering an incisive account of how gridlock is overcome and showing that political parties are less important in legislative-executive politics than previously thought, *Pivotal Politics* remakes our understanding of the American legislative process.

In the news we frequently hear that Washington just doesn't work or that gridlock has taken over the system. In *Pivotal Politics: A Theory of U.S. Lawmaking*, Krehbiel provides an explanation for why. Basically, certain government institutional features, such as the president's veto and the Senate's filibuster, make it very difficult to change policy. Thus, it is possible to have gridlock even when the same party controls both branches of government. My two criticisms of the book are as follows. First, the writing is a bit obtuse. I understand this is for an academic audience (I consider myself part of that crowd). However, there are times when Krehbiel uses terms like "changes in gridlock," when it really seems to mean either an increase or decrease. Some of the diagrams aren't well explained and it took me a while to fully understand what was going on. Second, I'm not quite sure how his theory differs from the broader institutional literature on *Veto Players*. I do wish this book were more accessible to a wider audience. I think it goes a long way toward moderating the public's expectations with regard to "change".

I had very low expectations, to be sure. All said and done, however, this is a v. fine book, considering that my brother-in-law wrote it. But, really now. Even as a total non-scientist I actually did find the book (o-k, the parts I read) interesting and informative. And even though I of necessity skipped right past the math and grids and charts and doodles and stuff, the substance made sense because of "the author's" down-to-earth narrative style. (I suppose it may also have helped that he explained the whole theory, or as much as he thought his brother and I could grasp, over beers one night. Be that as it may.) I, under no threats or inducements, sincerely recommend this book to anyone interested in looking beyond the common assumption that Party X in the White House and Party Y controlling Congress ("divided government" I recall to be the super-duper scientific term) is likely to result in the dreaded Gridlock. Or the gridded Dreadlocks. Music Up: "It Ain't Necessarily So...."

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