Introduction to the American Political Process

Class 9: Congress 2

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Overview

1. Readings

    Krehbiel, “Pivotal Politics”

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Krehbiel, “Pivotal Politics”

Gridlock: The persistent inability to enact major legislation when majorities on Capitol Hill and/or the President seem to prefer such enactments to the status quo.

Three clarifications:

1. Not inherently partisan
2. Not new in American politics
3. Not necessarily a bad thing

Krehbiel, “Pivotal Politics”

A **theory of gridlock** should address three empirical realities:

1. We get gridlock **often**, but **not always**
2. When gridlock is broken, it is by **large winning coalitions** as opposed to bare majorities
3. When gridlock is broken, it is by **bipartisan coalitions**

Krehbiel, “Pivotal Politics”

	Frequency	Coalition size	Partisanship
Reality	**Common**	**Large**	**Bipartisan**
Responsible party government	Nonexistent	Size of majority party	Majority
Conditional party government	?	Size of majority party	Majority
Unified vs. divided government	As common as divided gvmt	Size of majority party	Majority
Median voter theorem	Nonexistent	Just over half	?
Majoritarian chaos	Nonexistent	?	?
Stability-inducing	Sometimes	?	?
…			

Elements of the Theory: Players and Preferences

The players are *n* legislators (for simplicity, *n* is odd) with the following preference structure:

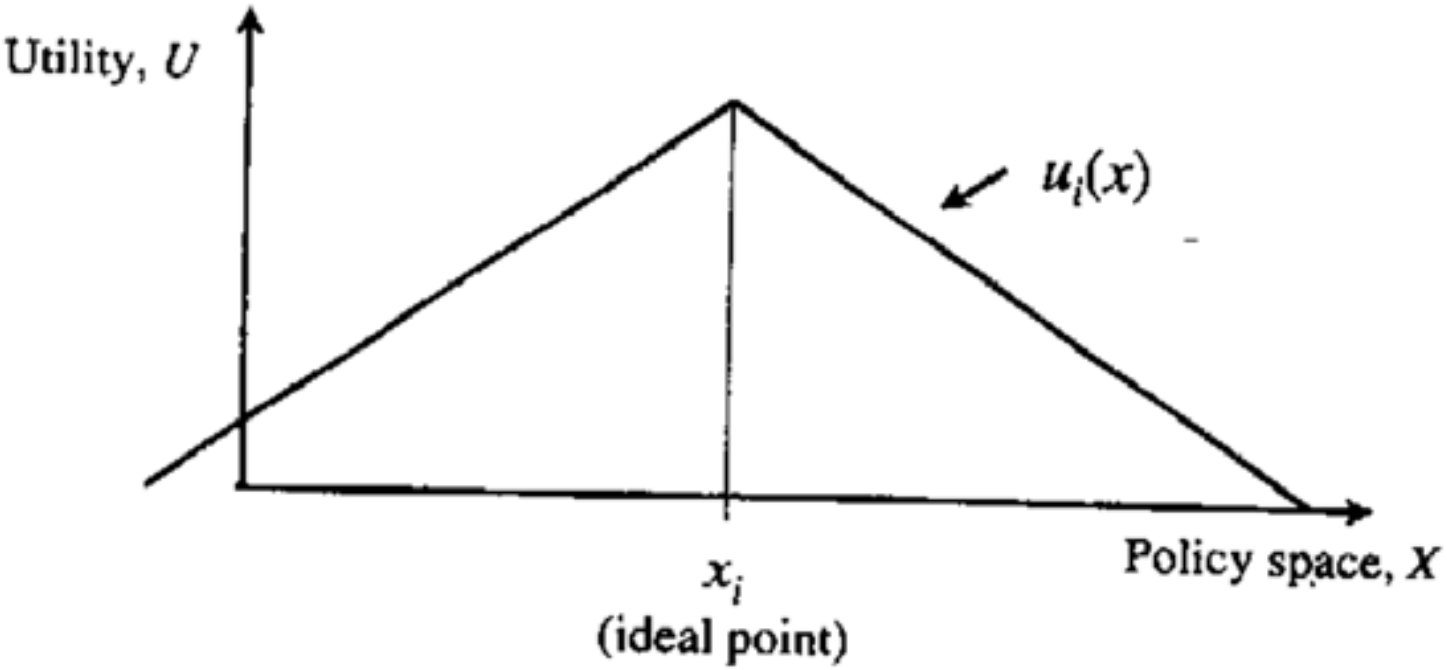
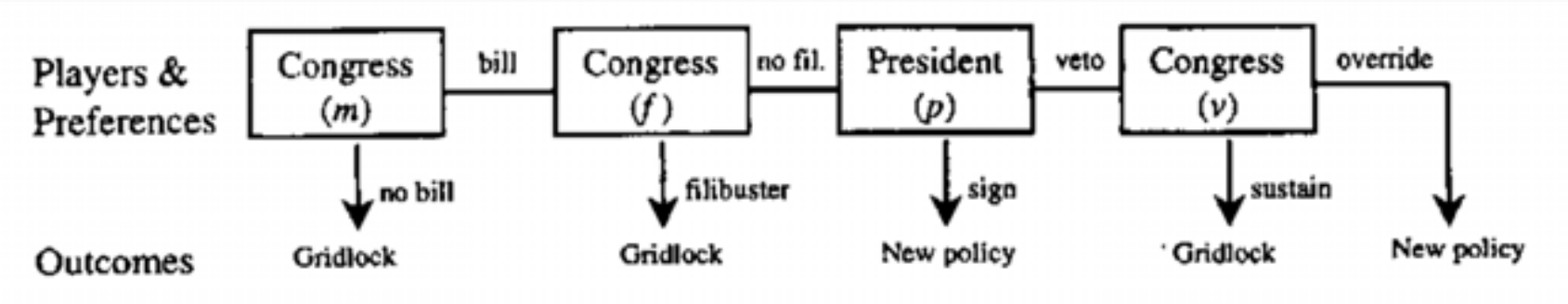


Figure 2.1
Single-peaked utility function for legislator *i*

Krehbiel, Keith. "A Theory." Chapter 2 in *Pivotal Politics: A Theory of U.S. Lawmaking*. University of Chicago Press, 1998. © University of Chicago Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/.

Elements of the Theory: Procedures



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The game proceeds as follows:

1. Median legislator proposes a bill or accepts the status quo
2. Filibuster pivot (3/5) decides whether to invoke cloture
3. President can sign bill into law or veto
4. Congress can override presidential veto (2/3)

Case 1: The Economic Stimulus Package

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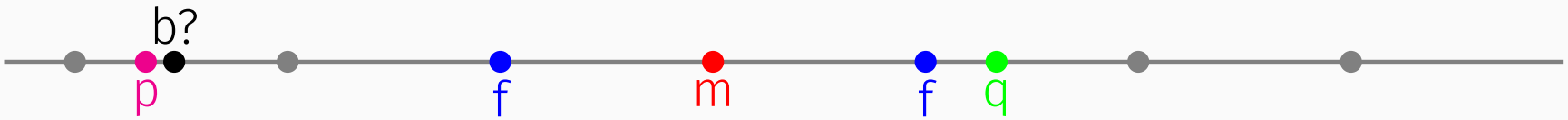

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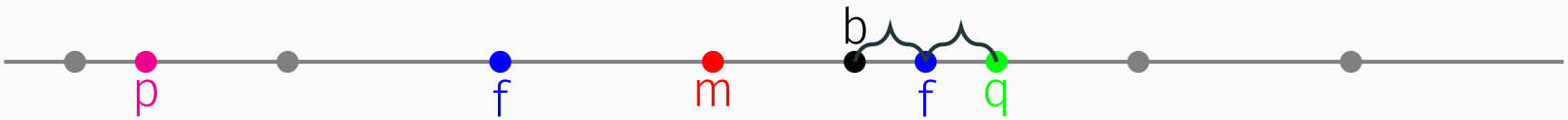

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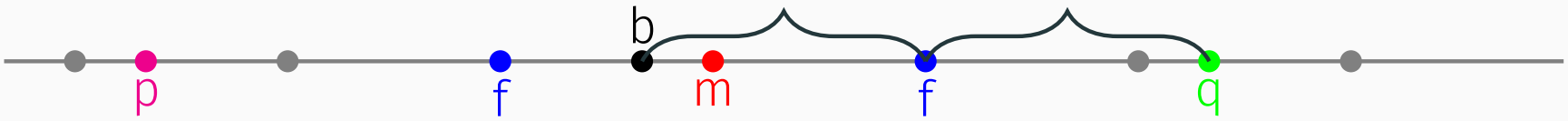

Note: A more extreme (right) status quo allows for a more extreme leftward policy shift. (And vice-versa.)

Case 2: Family Leave (GRIDLOCK)

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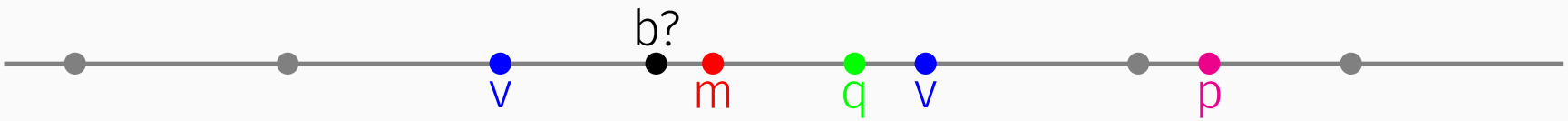

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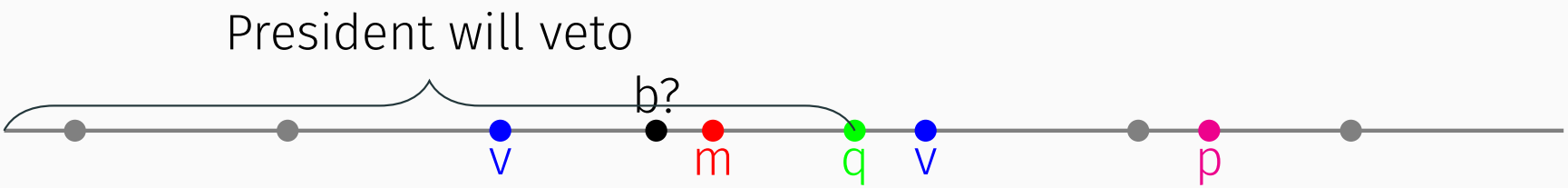
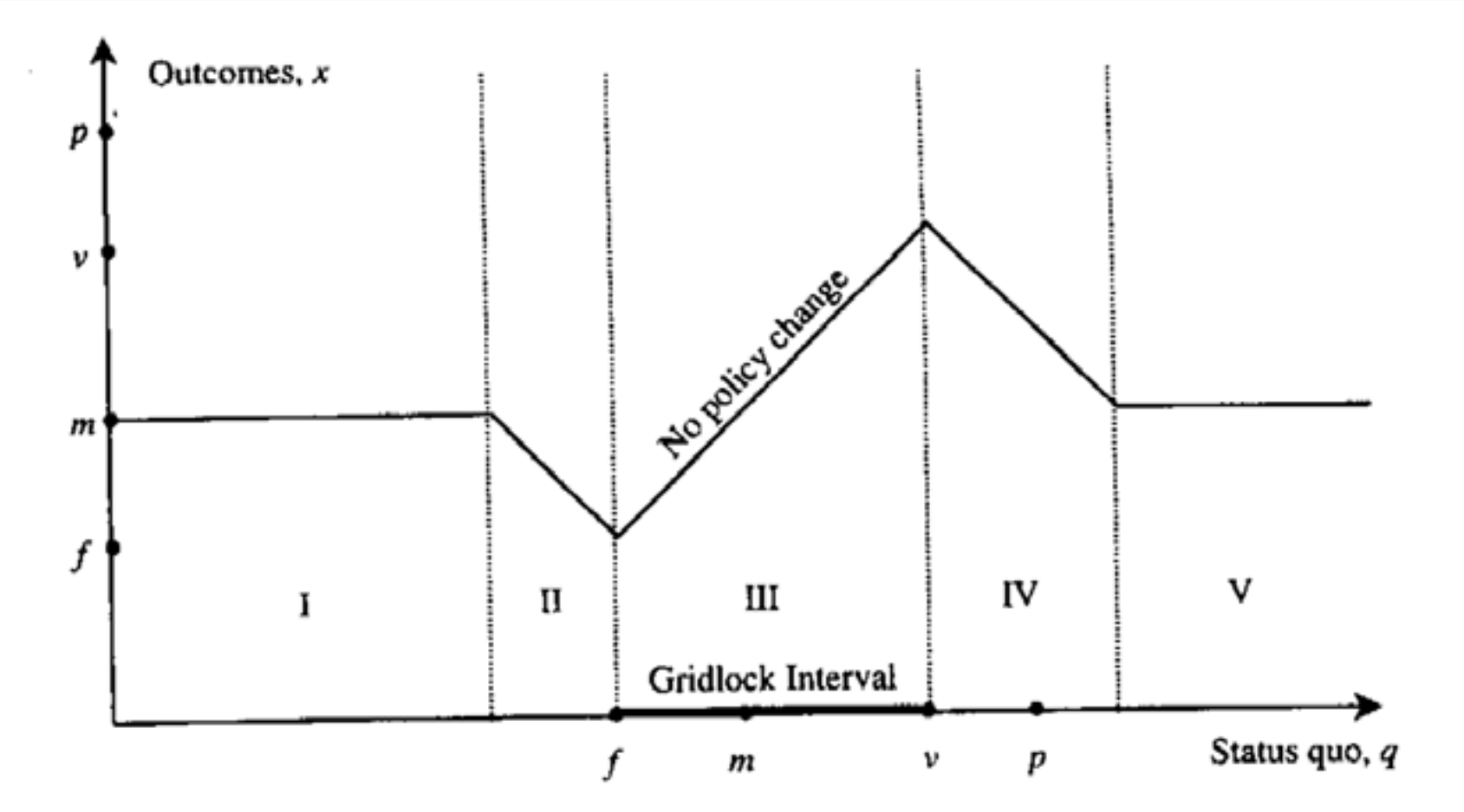


Equilibrium



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Key Takeaways

1. Legislative productivity depends on the width of the gridlock interval
2. When policy swings, it often swings dramatically
    - When status quo is moderate, it is hard to move
3. Gridlock is broken by large, possibly bipartisan coalitions (bigger than simple majority)
4. Gridlock can occur in unified or divided government

Assumptions

What important assumptions went into the Pivotal Politics model, and what might break it?

1. Open rule (vs. majority party agenda control (Cox & McCubbins))
2. No parties!
3. Single dimension of ideology
4. No interest groups or pork

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