

Regressive Sin Taxes by Lockwood and Taubinsky: A Critical Review

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Introduction

Two conflicting forces at play when considering sin taxes

- ▶ People make bad decisions
 - ▶ Correcting this can potentially increase welfare
 - ▶ Similar logic to Pigouvian tax
- ▶ Sin taxes can be regressive
 - ▶ Cigarettes and sugary drinks consumed disproportionately by the poor
 - ▶ High efficiency subsidies disproportionately taken by rich

Goal of Model

- ▶ A model that addresses both of these concerns
- ▶ Includes variable income tax
- ▶ Consumers have heterogeneous earnings, abilities, and tastes, and can choose labor supply and consumption bundles
- ▶ Policy makers choose linear commodity tax and non-linear income tax
- ▶ Policy maker and consumers disagree about what is best for them

The Model

The Environment

► Variable definitions

Variable	Meaning
θ	Consumer Type
$\mu(\theta)$	Distribution of Type
z	Earnings
$T(z)$	nonlinear income tax
c_2	Sin Good
t	Linear Commodity tax on c_2
c_1	Numerator good
p	Price of c_2
$U(c_1, c_2, z; \theta)$	Decision Utility
$V(c_1, c_2, z; \theta)$	Policymaker "correct" utility
$\alpha(\theta)$	Pareto Weights

► Functional form assumptions

- U is increasing and weakly concave in c_1 and c_2 and decreasing and strictly concave in z

The Model

Policymaker's Problem

- ▶ Policymaker wants to maximize experienced utility V
 - ▶ Weight consumers by Pareto weights
 - ▶ Can choose $T(\cdot)$ and t to do this
 - ▶ Subject to budget constraint
 - ▶ Subject to individuals doing what they want

$$\max_{T,t} \int \alpha(\theta) V(c_1(\theta), c_2(\theta), z(\theta); \theta) \mu(\theta)$$

Subject to the budget constraint

$$\int (tc_2(\theta) + T(z(\theta))) \mu(\theta) = 0$$

and individual maximization

$$\{c_1(\theta), c_2(\theta), z(\theta)\} = \arg \max_{c_1, c_2, z} U(c_1, c_2, z; \theta)$$

$$s.t. \quad c_1 + (1+t)c_2 < z - T(z) \quad \forall \quad \theta$$

The Model

Difference between U and V

- ▶ Incorrect beliefs
 - ▶ Calorie content of food
 - ▶ Health costs of food or drugs
 - ▶ Energy efficiency of products
- ▶ Limited attention or salience bias
 - ▶ People think "fat free" ice cream is healthy
- ▶ Present Bias/ Time Inconsistency
 - ▶ Hyperbolic discounting ($\beta - \delta$ discounting)
 - ▶ The model can treat β as a bias.
 - ▶ Policy maker could also weight present and future selves arbitrarily

The Model

A Price Metric for Consumer Bias

Variable	Meaning
y	$z - T(z)$
$c_2(\theta, y, p, t, T)$	Consumption chosen by individual of type θ given constraints
$c_2^V(\theta, y, p, t, T)$	What individual would choose if maximizing over V
$\gamma(\theta, z, t, T)$ or "Bias"	γ s.t. $c_2(\theta, y, p, t, T) = c_2^V(\theta, y - c_2\gamma, p - \gamma, t, T)$

- ▶ This is the compensated price change that produces the same effect on demand as the bias does
- ▶ In some cases this can be measure directly
 - ▶ Chetty et al. (2009)
 - ▶ Tax salience
 - ▶ Δ price that alters demand as much as tax-inclusive price

The Model

Redistributive Motives

- ▶ Marginal social welfare weights
 - ▶ Marginal social welfare generated by a marginal unit of consumption of c_1 for a given individual
 - ▶ Formally, $g(\theta) = \alpha(\theta) V_1 / \lambda$
 - ▶ $\bar{g} = \int_{\Theta} g(\theta) d\mu(\theta)$
 - ▶ If there are no income effects on consumption and labor supply, then $\bar{g} = 1$ by construction.
- ▶ Formulas for optimal taxes will thus depend on the policymaker's (or society's) preferences for wealth equality

Optimal Tax With Discrete Types

- ▶ $\theta \in L, H$
- ▶ $w_L < w_H$
- ▶ Internality is harmful $\gamma(\theta) > 0$
- ▶ L consumes more c_2 than H
- ▶ Normalize c_2 so $p = 1$
- ▶ $c_1^*(\theta) = z^*(\theta) - T_\theta - (1 + t)c_2^*(\theta)$

Example 1: Regressivity Caused by Heterogeneous Preferences

Functional Form Assumptions

$$U(c_1, c_2, z; \theta) = G(c_1 + v(c_2, \theta) - \Psi(z/w_\theta))$$

$$V(c_1, c_2, z; \theta) = G(c_1 + v(c_2, \theta) - \gamma(\theta)c_2 - \Psi(z/w_\theta))$$

- ▶ $c_2^*(H) < c_2^*(L)$
- ▶ No income effects for choice of c_2 or labor supply

Example 1: Regressivity Caused by Heterogeneous Preferences

Policy Maker's problem

Policymaker solves

$$\max_{t, T_L, T_H} \sum_{\theta} V(c_1^*(\theta), c_2^*(\theta, z^*(\theta); \theta) \mu(\theta)$$

S.T.

$$\frac{1}{2} \sum_{\theta} (T_{\theta} + t c_2^*(\theta)) \geq 0$$

and

$(c_1^*(\theta), c_2^*(\theta), z^*(\theta))$ Maximizes $U(c_1, c_2, z; \theta)$ given constraints

Example 1: Regressivity Caused by Heterogeneous Preferences

result

$$t^* = \underbrace{\frac{\sum_{\theta} g(\theta) \gamma(\theta) \frac{dc_2^*(\theta)}{dt}}{\sum_{\theta} \frac{dc_2^*(\theta)}{dt}}}_{\text{corrective benefits}} - \underbrace{\frac{\sum_{\theta} c_2^*(\theta) (g(\theta) - 1)}{\sum_{\theta} \frac{dc_2^*(\theta)}{dt}}}_{\text{Regressivity Costs}}$$

- ▶ *NOTE: in the paper they incorrectly have $1 - g(\theta)$ in the second term
- ▶ Correction is more valuable with greater bias $\gamma(\theta)$ and higher welfare weight $g(\theta)$
- ▶ Regressivity cost reduces optimal tax since $g(L) > 1$, $g(H) < 1$, and $c_2^*(H) < c_2^*(L)$

Example 2: Regressivity Caused by Income Effects

Functional Form Assumptions

$$U(c_1, c_2, z; \theta) = G(c_1 + v(c_2, c_1) - \Psi(z/w_\theta))$$

$$V(c_1, c_2, z; \theta) = G(c_1 + v(c_2, c_1) - \gamma(\theta)c_2 - \Psi(z/w_\theta))$$

Perturbation argument Raise commodity tax and adjust income tax to neutralize effect on wealth. At the optimum, this has zero first order effect on welfare. Giving

$$\underbrace{t \left(\sum_{\theta} \frac{dc_2^*(\theta)}{dt} \Big|_u \right)}_{\text{Effect on Gvernment Revenue}} - \underbrace{\sum_{\theta} \left(g(\theta) \gamma \frac{dc_2^*(\theta)}{dt} \Big|_u \right)}_{\text{Effect on Consumer Welfare}} = 0$$

Example 2: Regressivity Caused by Income Effects

Result

$$t^* = \frac{\sum_{\theta} \left(g(\theta) \gamma \frac{dc_2^*(\theta)}{dt} \Big|_u \right)}{\sum_{\theta} \frac{dc_2^*(\theta)}{dt} \Big|_u}$$

- ▶ No regressivity costs in this case
- ▶ Income tax reform can perfectly neutralize the effects of the commodity tax on income

Understanding The Difference

- ▶ Progressive taxes make people work less
- ▶ Heterogeneous Preferences
 - ▶ Changing income will not alter consumption
 - ▶ c_2 tax is regressive from societal standpoint
 - ▶ Not regressive for individual
 - ▶ Does not alter z
 - ▶ Progressive income tax lowers z
- ▶ Income Effects
 - ▶ c_2 good is inferior
 - ▶ c_2 tax is regressive from societal standpoint
 - ▶ c_2 tax is also regressive for individual
 - ▶ If I work more, I can buy less c_2 and avoid the tax
 - ▶ leads to higher z
 - ▶ Progressive income tax lowers z
 - ▶ z effects offset, total output unchanged

A General Formula for The Optimal Commodity Tax

Assumptions and elasticity concepts

Assumptions

- ▶ No labor supply mis-optimization
- ▶ Constant marginal social welfare weights conditional on income
- ▶ U and V are smooth, strictly concave in c_1, c_2, z and μ is differentiable with full support
- ▶ $T(\cdot)$ is twice differentiable and each consumer's choice of income z admits a unique global optimum

A General Formula for The Optimal Commodity Tax

Assumptions and elasticity concepts

Parameters

- ▶ $\zeta(\theta, t, T)$: Price elasticity of demand for c_2 of type θ
- ▶ $\zeta^c(\theta, t, T)$: Compensated price elasticity of demand for c_2
- ▶ $\eta(\theta, t, T)$: The income effect on c_2 equal to $\zeta - \zeta^c$
- ▶ $\zeta_z^c(\theta, t, T)$: The compensated elasticity of taxable income with respect to the marginal income tax rate
- ▶ $\eta_z(\theta, t, T)$: Income effect on labor supply

A General Formula for the Optimal Commodity Tax

Assumptions and elasticity concepts

- ▶ $\bar{X}(z)$ is the average of variable X for given income z
- ▶ C_2 is $\int_{\Theta} 1z(\theta) \leq zd\mu(\theta)$
- ▶ $H(z)$ is the income distribution
- ▶ $\phi(z)$ is how much c_2 an average z -earner would consume if all variation in c_2 was explained solely by income effects.
- ▶ Let $\tilde{\phi}(z) := \frac{\bar{c}_2(z) - \phi(z)}{C_2}$
 - ▶ This measures how much difference between $\bar{c}_2(z)$ and $\bar{c}_2(0)$ is explained by preference heterogeneity. (normalize by average c_2)

A General Formula for the Optimal Commodity Tax

An expression for the optimal commodity tax 1

Average Marginal Bias

$$\bar{\gamma}(t, T) = \frac{\int_{\Theta} \gamma(\theta, t, T) \left(\frac{dc_2(\theta, t, T)}{dt} \Big|_u \right) d\mu(\theta)}{\int_{\Theta} \left(\frac{dc_2(\theta, t, T)}{dt} \Big|_u \right) d\mu(\theta)}$$

Average Marginal Bias Given z

$$\bar{\gamma}(z, t, T) = \frac{\int_{\Theta} \gamma(\theta, t, T) \left(\frac{dc_2(\theta, t, T)}{dt} \Big|_u \right) 1\{z(\theta, t, T) = z\} d\mu(\theta)}{\int_{\Theta} \left(\frac{dc_2(\theta, t, T)}{dt} \Big|_u \right) 1\{z(\theta, t, T) = z\} d\mu(\theta)}$$

This is the marginal bias weighted by individuals marginal responses to a compensated change in t

A General Formula for the Optimal Commodity Tax

An expression for the optimal commodity tax 1

Covariance of welfare weight with consumption-weighted bias and elasticity

$$\sigma := \text{Cov}_H \left[g(z), \frac{\gamma(\bar{z})}{\bar{\gamma}} \frac{\bar{\zeta}^c(z)}{\bar{\zeta}^c} \frac{\bar{c}_2(z)}{C_2} \right]$$

This captures the extent to which bias correction is concentrated on the low-end of the income distribution

A General Formula for the Optimal Commodity Tax

An expression for the optimal commodity tax 1

- ▶ Start by using social marginal utility of income $\hat{g}(z)$ rather than social marginal welfare weights
- ▶ Average welfare effect of marginally increasing the incomes of consumers currently earning income z
- ▶ Rather than marginally increasing numeraire consumption c_1
- ▶ This accounts for fiscal externalities resulting from income effects, and for the fact that some of this additional consumption will be mis-spent due to bias

A General Formula for the Optimal Commodity Tax

An expression for the optimal commodity tax 1

Proposition 1

$$t = \bar{\gamma}(\bar{g} + \sigma) - \frac{p + t}{\bar{\zeta}^c} \text{Cov} [\hat{g}(z), \tilde{\phi}(z)] \quad (1)$$

$$= \frac{\bar{\zeta}^c \bar{\gamma}(\bar{g} + \sigma) - p \text{Cov} [\hat{g}(z), \tilde{\phi}(z)]}{\bar{\zeta}^c + \text{Cov} [\hat{g}(z), \tilde{\phi}(z)]} \quad (2)$$

- ▶ Corrective benefit is increasing in
 - ▶ Average marginal bias $\bar{\gamma}$
 - ▶ Average social welfare weight \bar{g}
 - ▶ Extent to which bias correction is concentrated with low income consumers σ
- ▶ $\text{Cov} [\hat{g}(z), \tilde{\phi}(z)]$ is roughly regressivity cost that cannot be offset by progressive income taxes.
 - ▶ Depends on extent to which c_2 differential is due to preference heterogeneity or income effects.

A General Formula for the Optimal Commodity Tax

An expression for the optimal commodity tax 2

Lemma 2 Let $\chi(z) := \phi(z) - \int_0^z w(x, z) \frac{\eta_z}{\zeta_z^c x} (c_2(x) - \phi(x)) dx$,

where $w(x, z) = e^{\int_{z'=x}^{z'=z} \frac{\eta_z}{\zeta_z^c z} dx'}$. Then increasing the commodity tax by dt and decreasing the income tax by $\chi(z)dt$ leaves the average labor supply of z -earners unchanged.

$\chi(z) := \phi(z)$ when $\eta_z = 0$. i.e. when there are no labor supply income effects.

Define $\tilde{\chi}(z) := \frac{\bar{c}_2(z) - \chi(z)}{C_2}$

A General Formula for the Optimal Commodity Tax

An expression for the optimal commodity tax 2

Proposition 2 The optimal commodity tax t satisfies.

$$t = \underbrace{\bar{\gamma}(\bar{g} + \sigma)}_{\text{corrective benefits}} + \underbrace{\frac{p+t}{\bar{\zeta}^c} \mathbb{E}[(g(z) - 1)\tilde{\chi}(z)]}_{\text{regressivity costs}} - \underbrace{\frac{1}{\bar{\zeta}^c} \int \tilde{\chi}(z)\eta(z)(t - g(z)\bar{\gamma}(z))}_{\text{additional impact from income effect}}$$

In the absence of income effects

$$t = \bar{\gamma}(\bar{g} + \sigma) - \frac{p+t}{\bar{\zeta}^c} \text{Cov} \left[g(z), \tilde{\phi}(z) \right]$$

Interpretations and Implication

Optimal taxes in the Absence of Redistributive Concerns

Corollary 2 suppose that either

1) $z(\theta)$ is constant in θ or

2) $g(\theta) = 1 \forall \theta$

Then $t^* = \bar{\gamma}$ (from Proposition 1).

- Optimal commodity tax exactly offsets the average marginal bias

Interpretations and Implication

Optimal taxes in the Absence of corrective Concerns

When there are no corrective concerns

$$t = - \frac{p \text{Cov} [\hat{g}(z), \tilde{\phi}(z)]}{\bar{\zeta}^c + \text{Cov} [\hat{g}(z), \tilde{\phi}(z)]}$$

- ▶ The Atkinson-Stiglitz theorem itself obtains as a special case of (6) when all variation in c_2 consumption is driven by income effects, which then implies that $t = 0$

Interpretations and Implication

Optimal Taxes When Income Effects do not Affect c_2 consumption

Corollary 3 Suppose that there are no income effects: $\eta \equiv 0$ and $\eta_z \equiv 0$ then

$$t = \underbrace{\bar{\gamma}(\bar{g} + \sigma)}_{\text{Corrective Benefits}} - \underbrace{\frac{p+t}{\bar{\zeta}^c} \text{Cov} \left[g(z), \tilde{\phi}(z) \right]}_{\text{Regressivity Costs}}$$

- ▶ Generalizes the result in Example 1
- ▶ First term now depends of σ (concentration of corrective benefits among low income)
- ▶ Second term persists because progressive income tax. Fiscal externalities outweigh re-distributive benefit
- ▶ As consumption of c_2 becomes inelastic, t become a sin subsidy

Interpretations and Implication

Optimal taxes when all differences in c_2 consumption are due to income effects

Corollary 4 Suppose that $U_2(c_1, c_2, \theta, z)/U_1(c_1, c_2, \theta, z)$ is constant in θ for each z . Then

$$t^* = \bar{\gamma}(\bar{g} + \sigma)$$

- ▶ Generalizes Example 2
- ▶ Higher σ implies higher benefit to bias correction
- ▶ Policymaker will spend more than \$1 to eliminate \$1 mistake made by poor consumers

Interpretations and Implication

The key role of the price elasticity of demand in determining the importance of corrective benefits

Recall From Proposition 1

$$t = \frac{\bar{\zeta}^c \bar{\gamma} (\bar{g} + \sigma) - p \text{Cov} [\hat{g}(z), \tilde{\phi}(z)]}{\bar{\zeta}^c + \text{Cov} [\hat{g}(z), \tilde{\phi}(z)]}$$

- ▶ As elasticity grows large, corrective benefits per unit of tax grow large
- ▶ As elasticity gets small, corrective benefits become negligible
- ▶ Elasticity low enough can imply a subsidy on sin goods

Extensions

- ▶ Tax salience on the labor supply margin
 - ▶ Effect of commodity taxes on labor supply may be minimal
 - ▶ If people don't consider commodity taxes in labor supply, moves us closer to preference heterogeneity case
- ▶ $N > 2$ Dimension of Consumption
 - ▶ Considers substitutability of goods
- ▶ Externalities
 - ▶ Special case of this framework
- ▶ Without the first-order approach
- ▶ Labor supply misoptimization

Conclusion

- ▶ Reconciles the role for corrective taxes with the concern that such taxes may be regressive
- ▶ Clarifies that the optimal policy depends on a number of statistics
 - ▶ Preference heterogeneity vs. income effects
 - ▶ Bias of both rich and poor
 - ▶ Elasticity of demand and how it varies across income
 - ▶ Salience of commodity taxes on labor supply margin

Citation

B. Lockwood and D. Taubinsky, “Regressive Sin Taxes,” NBER WP No. 23085, March 2017.