# The unintended effect of import competition on corporate tax avoidance

#### Baptiste Souillard1

<sup>1</sup> ECARES, SBS-EM, Université Libre de Bruxelles

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#### Motivation

Introduction



- Profits are subject to taxation
- To lighten this **burden**, firms adapt how they operate and invest
- Some **avoid taxes**, i.e., exploit technicalities of the law to save taxes
- Corporate tax avoidance has now become a major policy concern
  - Tax scandals, income inequalities, budget deficits, etc.
  - Profit shifting ≈ \$100b annual loss in tax revenues for the US (Clausing, 2016)

# What I do in this paper

Introduction

- The present paper examines the role played by one particular aspect of globalization: import competition
- The approach lies at the intersection of 2 strands of research
  - Economics: impact of the China shock → massive shock + quasi-natural experiment (e.g., Autor et al., 2013; Bloom et al., 2016; Pierce and Schott, 2016; Hombert and Matray, 2018)
  - Accounting: measurement of corporate tax avoidance (e.g., Frank et al., 2009; Hanlon and Heitzman, 2010; Henry and Sansing, 2018; Badertscher et al., 2019: De Simone et al., 2019)
- I study the effect of the China shock on tax avoidance of US-headquartered public manufacturing firms using data on their financial statements

#### Preview of the results.

Introduction

- The paper documents a positive and causal effect of import competition on corporate tax avoidance
- This effect is specific to **multinational enterprises** (MNEs):
  - $\uparrow$  import competition  $\Rightarrow \uparrow$  intangible assets  $\Rightarrow \uparrow$  profit shifting
- This effect is unintended: MNEs invested in intangibles to escape competition in the first place (not to save taxes)
- The findings have policy implications:
  - they shed light on the determinants of corporate tax avoidance
  - they suggest that the China shock contributed 17 percent to the decline in the average effective tax rate of US publicly listed firms observed between 1990 and 2005 (Dyreng et al., 2017)
  - they help understand the recent backlash against large firms and globalization (Helpman, 2017; Ravallion, 2018; Rodrik, 2018)

#### Related literature

Introduction

- Growing evidence of **profit shifting** activities (Beer et al., 2020)
  - Channels: e.g., Egger et al. (2010), Griffith et al. (2014), Alstadsaeter et al. (2018), Davies et al. (2018), Laffitte and Toubal (2019)
  - Macro estimates: e.g., Crivelli et al. (2016), Clausing (2016), Cobham and Jansky (2018), Tørsløv et al. (2018), Laffitte et al. (2020)
- Studies on the determinants of corporate tax avoidance (Alm et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2020)
  - Internal drivers: e.g., Desai and Dharmapala (2009), McGuire et al. (2014), Higgins et al. (2015), Khan et al. (2017), Souillard (2020)
  - External factors: e.g., Hoopes et al. (2012), Dyreng et al. (2016), Edwards et al. (2016), Tian et al. (2016), Cen et al. (2017)
- Numerous papers investigating the effect of the China shock
  - Labor markets: e.g., Autor et al. (2013), Mion and Zhu (2013), Utar and Ruiz (2013), Utar (2014). Acemoglu et al. (2016). Pierce and Schott (2016).
  - Firms: e.g., lacovone et al. (2013), Bloom et al. (2016), Hombert and Matray (2018). Chakraborty and Henry (2019), Amiti et al. (2020)

#### Outline of the talk

- Introduction
- 2 Data

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- Causal effect
- 4 Mechanism
- 6 Conclusion

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## Outline of the talk

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#### Sources and key variables

Firm-level data and tax avoidance variables

#### The firm-level data come from COMPUSTAT

- COMPUSTAT consists of balance sheets, income statements, and cash flows of publicly listed firms in North America since 1950
- I construct 4 firm-year specific indicators of corporate tax avoidance:
  - ratio of income taxes to pre-tax income (ETR)
  - ratio of non-deferred income taxes to pre-tax income (ETR2)
  - ratio of cash income taxes paid to pre-tax income (CASHETR)
  - ratio of cash income taxes paid to operating cash flows (CFM)
- ► These variables are the **most prevalent** metrics in the accounting literature and also **complementary** Correlation table

## Sources and key variables

Industry-level data and import competition variable

I supplement COMPUSTAT with **industry-level data** at the **4-digit SIC** level from the NBER-CES Manufacturing Industry Database and Schott (2008)

- NBER-CES: annual output, employment, etc from 1958 to 2011
- Schott (2008): annual bilateral US exports and imports from 1972 to 2005
- ► The import competition variable is the **penetration ratio of US imports from China**:

$$IMP_{ijt} = IMP_{jt} = \frac{Imports_{jt}^{China,US}}{Output_{jt}^{US} + Imports_{jt}^{World,US} - Exports_{jt}^{US,World}}$$

Firm *i* mostly active in sector *j* in year *t* 

► This ratio varies both **over time** and **across sectors** ► Example

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## Sample

Focus on US public manufacturing firms between 1990 and 2005

I use a subsample containing only **US-headquartered** firms operating **between 1990 and 2005** in **manufacturing** 

- Headquartered in the US for comparability
- ▶ 1990s: start of the boom of China's exports → Graph
- 90 percent of China's exports were manufacturing products

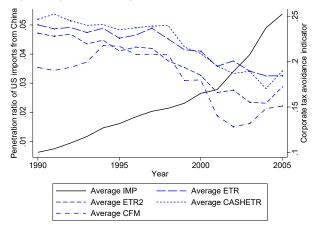
The unbalanced sample includes 5,739 firms operating in 218 industries

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# First evidence on import competition and corporate tax avoidance

Figure 1 – Import competition and corporate tax avoidance: macro-level evidence ▶ Table



► The positive correlation holds at the industry-level ► Graph ► Table

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#### Econometric model

Benchmark specification

I assess the effect of import competition on corporate tax avoidance by regressing:

$$CTA_{ijt} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 IMP_{jt} + \beta_2 X_{ijt} + \alpha_i + \delta_t + \epsilon_{ijt}$$

- CTA: corporate tax avoidance variable
- IMP: penetration ratio of US imports from China
- X: vector of control variables (e.g., sales, pre-tax income, tax loss carry forward, assets, profitability, leverage, foreign operations)
- α: firm fixed effects
- δ: year fixed effects

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#### Baseline results

A positive effect of competition on corporate tax avoidance

Table 1 – Effect of import competition on corporate tax avoidance: baseline equation

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	ETR <sub>ijt</sub>	ETR2 <sub>ijt</sub>	CASHETR <sub>ijt</sub>	CFM <sub>ijt</sub>
IMP <sub>jt</sub>	-0.20 <sup>a</sup> (0.03)	-0.18 <sup>b</sup> (0.07)	-0.18 <sup>a</sup> (0.04)	-0.26 <sup>a</sup> (0.06)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Firm FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R <sup>2</sup>	0.20	0.21	0.13	0.12
Nb. of obs.	23,097	22,286	16,688	16,584

*Notes.* Standard errors, in parentheses, are clustered at the 4-digit 1987 SIC industry.  ${}^dp < 0.15$ ,  ${}^cp < 0.10$ ,  ${}^bp < 0.05$ ,  ${}^ap < 0.01$ .

▶ Counterfactual analysis

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# Sensitivity tests

Exclusion of outliers, more controls, model specification, and falsification tests

#### The effect is

- robust to removing different types of outliers: extreme values of the right-hand side variables, firms with negative profits, entries and exits, firms involved in a merger/acquisition operation
- robust to extending the set of covariates: more globalization-related variables, finer sets of fixed effects
- consistent across specifications: 3-digit industry level, 4-year averages, 16-year differences
- corroborated by falsification tests: random industry, pre-period data



# **Endogeneity issues**

Lagged independent variables, IV strategy, and diff-in-diff approach

- ► Reverse causality + "bad controls" (Angrist and Pischke, 2009)
  - ⇒ lag right-hand side variables → Tabulated results
- ▶ Isolate **supply-side** driven shocks of import competition
  - ⇒ strategy akin to Autor et al. (2013)
    - Imports from China of 8 other high-income countries
    - Identification relies on 3 (too strong?) assumptions → Tabulated results
- Alternative: exploit the granting of PNTR by the US to China in 2000
  - Responsible for 1/3 of the growth of US expenditures in Chinese goods (Handley and Limao, 2017)
  - Key variable: difference between the NNTR and NTR tariff rates
  - Most of the variation comes from NNTR tariff rates, established in the 1930s

$$CTA_{ijt} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \frac{PNTR_{jt}}{PNTR_{jt}} + \beta_2 X_{ijt} + \alpha_i + \delta_t + \epsilon_{ijt}$$

with  $PNTR_{it} = 1_{t \ge 2001} \left( NNTR_{i1999} - NTR_{i1999} \right)$  Tabulated results Common trend and placebo

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# What is behind this average effect?

Profit shifting of multinational firms via intangible assets

- MNEs can avoid taxes more easily than the others: growing evidence in the literature that they shift profits towards low-tax countries
  - ⇒ Is the average effect driven by MNEs?
  - → Yes! Tabulated results
- There are 3 main ways through which MNEs shift profits: royalty payments, loans, and transfer prices
- Only the first channel can be identified in COMPUSTAT and the strategic location of intangibles is one of the dominant profit shifting channels (Heckemeyer and Overesch, 2017)
  - ⇒ Indirect effect of competition through intangible assets?
  - → Yes! Tabulated results

China shock → MNEs invested in intangibles → MNEs shifted more profits

# Did MNEs invested in intangibles to shift more profits?

No, they did it to escape competition in the first place

- If MNEs invested in intangibles to shift more profits and save taxes, we should note more foreign direct investments of MNEs in tax havens following the shock
  - ⇒ Did MNEs intensify their network of subsidiaries in tax havens?
  - No! ► Tabulated results
- ► Alternatively, investments in intangibles could be a way to **escape competition** 
  - $\Rightarrow$  Is the negative impact of the China shock on sales mitigated by intangibles?
  - ⇒ Yes! 

    Tabulated results

The increase in corporate tax avoidance is **a side effect** of import competition

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# Summary of the paper

- The effect of import competition on corporate tax avoidance has not yet been studied in the literature
- This paper attemps to fill this gap by investigating the effect of rising Chinese import competition on tax avoidance of US publicly listed firms
- The paper documents a positive, causal, and statistically robust effect of trade-induced competition on corporate tax avoidance
- The China shock prompted MNEs to invest in intangibles and these assets allowed them to shift more profits towards low-tax countries
- However, this effect is unintended: these intangibles primarily aimed at alleviating losses rather than saving taxes

Thank you for your attention!

Questions, suggestions, and comments are welcome: baptiste.souillard@ulb.be

Full paper and more info about my research: www.baptistesouillard.com

# Corporate tax avoidance variables

Table 2 - Correlation of tax avoidance variables within firms

	ETR	ETR2	CASHETR	CFM
ETR	1.00			
ETR2	0.54	1.00		
CASHETR	0.25	0.44	1.00	
CFM	0.20	0.29	0.66	1.00

Notes. This table reports the mean Pearson's correlation coefficients between the four tax avoidance variables within firms. For a firm-year observation to be included in the computation of a correlation coefficient, the two tax avoidance variables must lie in the [0,1] interval.



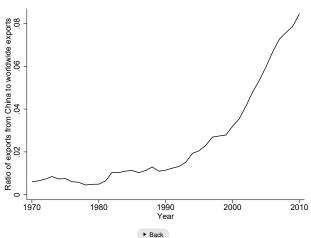
## Import penetration ratio across sectors

- ► The penetration ratio of Chinese exports to the US of hardwood veneer and plywood products (SIC 2435) was 12 percent in 2005, i.e., about twice the average
- For softwood veneer and plywood products (SIC 2436), the import penetration ratio was 40 times smaller in the same year (0.3 percent)



# China's exports

Figure 2 – Exports from China between 1970 and 2010



## Correlation (1)

Table 3 – Import competition and corporate tax avoidance: macro-level regressions

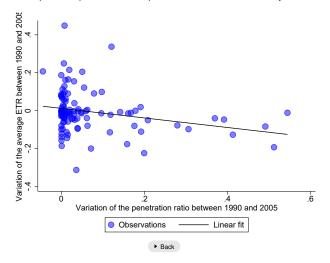
	$\frac{(1)}{ETR_t}$	$\frac{(2)}{ETR2_t}$	$\frac{(3)}{CASHETR_t}$	$\frac{(4)}{CFM_t}$
$\overline{IMP}_t$	-1.36 <sup>a</sup>	-1.76 <sup>a</sup>	-1.73 <sup>a</sup>	-1.62 <sup>a</sup>
	(0.13)	(0.22)	(0.20)	(0.39)
Controls	No	No	No	No
Nb. of obs.	16	16	16	16

Notes. Standard errors are in parentheses.  $^dp <$  0.15,  $^cp <$  0.10,  $^bp <$  0.05,  $^ap <$  0.01.



# Correlation (2)

Figure 3 – Import competition and corporate tax avoidance: industry-level evidence



## Correlation (3)

Table 4 – Import competition and corporate tax avoidance: industry-level regressions

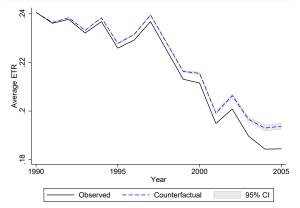
	(1) ETR <sub>jt</sub>	(2) ETR2 <sub>jt</sub>	$\frac{(3)}{CASHETR_{jt}}$	$\frac{(4)}{CFM_{jt}}$
$IMP_{jt}$	-0.11 <sup>d</sup> (0.07)	-0.11 <sup>c</sup> (0.06)	-0.06 (0.06)	-0.12 <sup>d</sup> (0.08)
Year FEs Industry FEs Nb. of obs.	Yes Yes 1,785	Yes Yes 1,771	Yes Yes 1,783	Yes Yes 1,783

*Notes.* Standard errors, in parentheses, are clustered at the 4-digit 1987 SIC industry.  $^dp < 0.15$ ,  $^cp < 0.10$ ,  $^bp < 0.05$ ,  $^ap < 0.01$ .



#### Baseline results

Figure 4 – Counterfactual analysis with back-of-the-envelope computations



- ► The average ETR would have been 0.93 percentage point higher in 2005 if the penetration ratio of US imports from China had been constant
- ► The China shock contributed **17 percent** to the decline in the average ETR observed between 1990 and 2005 ► Back

#### Robustness tests

Table 5 – Effect of import competition on corporate tax avoidance: robustness checks

	(1) ETR	(2) ETR2	(3) CASHETR	(4) CFM
Baseline estimates	-0.20 <sup>a</sup>	-0.18 <sup>b</sup>	-0.18 <sup>a</sup>	-0.26 <sup>a</sup>
Panel A: exclusion of outliers				
A1. Extreme values	-0.36 <sup>a</sup>	-0.30 <sup>a</sup>	-0.33 <sup>a</sup>	-0.43 <sup>a</sup>
A2. Negative profits	-0.15 <sup>a</sup>	-0.11 <sup>c</sup>	-0.17 <sup>a</sup>	-0.22 <sup>a</sup>
A3. Entries and exits	-0.22 <sup>a</sup>	-0.23 <sup>a</sup>	-0.17 <sup>a</sup>	-0.22 <sup>a</sup>
A4. Involved in M&A	-0.23 <sup>a</sup>	-0.19 <sup>a</sup>	-0.18 <sup>a</sup>	-0.27 <sup>a</sup>
Panel B: more controls				
B1. Trends in globalization	-0.17 <sup>a</sup>	-0.15 <sup>b</sup>	-0.19 <sup>a</sup>	-0.21 <sup>a</sup>
B2. Trends in globalization (USDIA included)	-0.20 <sup>a</sup>	-0.15 <sup>c</sup>	-0.18 <sup>b</sup>	-0.14 <sup>b</sup>
B3. State-year FEs	-0.20 <sup>a</sup>	-0.19 <sup>a</sup>	-0.16 <sup>a</sup>	-0.26 <sup>a</sup>
B4. State-year-MNE status FEs	-0.21 <sup>a</sup>	-0.18 <sup>a</sup>	-0.15 <sup>a</sup>	-0.27 <sup>a</sup>
Panel C: alternative specifications				
C1. SIC 3-digit industry	-0.15 <sup>a</sup>	-0.16 <sup>a</sup>	-0.11 <sup>b</sup>	-0.18 <sup>a</sup>
C2. 4-year periods	-0.30 <sup>a</sup>	-0.11	-0.17 <sup>c</sup>	-0.23 <sup>a</sup>
C3. 16-year differences	-0.18 <sup>c</sup>	-0.36 <sup>a</sup>	-0.16 <sup>c</sup>	-0.32 <sup>b</sup>
Panel D: falsification tests				
D1. Random industry	0.01	-0.02	-0.01	0.05
D2. Pre-period data	-0.11	-0.06	0.35	0.36

# Endogeneity issues (1)

Table 6 – Effect of import competition on corporate tax avoidance: endogeneity

	(1) ETR	(2) ETR2	(3) CASHETR	(4) CFM
Panel A: lagged controls				
A1. One-year lags	-0.21 <sup>a</sup>	-0.16 <sup>b</sup>	-0.19 <sup>a</sup>	-0.30 <sup>a</sup>
A2. Two-year lags	-0.21 <sup>a</sup>	-0.14 <sup>d</sup>	-0.19 <sup>a</sup>	-0.27 <sup>a</sup>

Panel B: 2SLS à la Autor et al. (2013)

B1. First-stage results: IMPit on instrument

Point estimate

F-statistic

B2. Second-stage results: CTA<sub>ijt</sub> on IMP<sub>jt</sub>

Point estimate

Panel C: PNTR as a quasi-natural experiment

Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Firm FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Notes. Standard errors are clustered at the 4-digit 1987 SIC industry and not reported for space.  $^dp < 0.15, ^cp < 0.10, ^bp < 0.05, ^ap < 0.01.$ 

# Endogeneity issues (2)

Table 7 – Effect of import competition on corporate tax avoidance: endogeneity

	(1) ETR	(2) ETR2	(3) CASHETR	(4) CFM
Panel A: lagged controls				
A1. One-year lags	-0.21 <sup>a</sup>	-0.16 <sup>b</sup>	-0.19 <sup>a</sup>	-0.30 <sup>a</sup>
A2. Two-year lags	-0.21ª	-0.14 <sup>d</sup>	-0.19 <sup>a</sup>	-0.27 <sup>a</sup>
Panel B: 2SLS à la Autor et al. (2013)				
B1. First-stage results: <i>IMP<sub>jt</sub></i> on instrument Point estimate	0.63ª	0.63 <sup>a</sup>	0.62 <sup>a</sup>	0.63ª
F-statistic	32.65	33.16	29.12	30.23
	32.03	33.10	23.12	30.23
B2. Second-stage results: CTA <sub>ijt</sub> on IMP <sub>jt</sub> Point estimate	-0.31 <sup>a</sup>	-0.28 <sup>b</sup>	-0.28 <sup>a</sup>	0.078
Point estimate	-0.31"	-0.28	-0.28*	-0.37 <sup>a</sup>
Panel C: PNTR as a quasi-natural experiment				
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Firm FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Notes. Standard errors are clustered at the 4-digit 1987 SIC industry and not reported for space.  $^dp < 0.15, ^cp < 0.10, ^bp < 0.05, ^ap < 0.01.$ 

# Endogeneity issues (3)

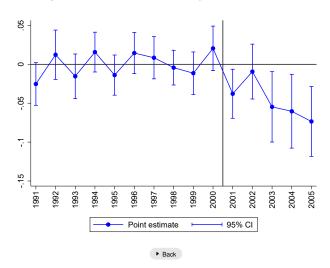
Table 8 – Effect of import competition on corporate tax avoidance: endogeneity

	(1) ETR	(2) ETR2	(3) CASHETR	(4) <i>CFM</i>
Panel A: lagged controls				
A1. One-year lags	-0.21 <sup>a</sup>	-0.16 <sup>b</sup>	-0.19 <sup>a</sup>	-0.30 <sup>a</sup>
A2. Two-year lags	-0.21 <sup>a</sup>	-0.14 <sup>d</sup>	-0.19 <sup>a</sup>	-0.27 <sup>a</sup>
Panel B: 2SLS à la Autor et al. (2013)				
B1. First-stage results: <i>IMP</i> <sub>jt</sub> on instrument				
Point estimate	0.64 <sup>a</sup>	0.63 <sup>a</sup>	0.62 <sup>a</sup>	0.63 <sup>a</sup>
F-statistic	32.65	33.16	29.12	30.23
B2. Second-stage results: CTA <sub>iit</sub> on ÎMP <sub>it</sub>				
Point estimate	-0.30 <sup>a</sup>	-0.28 <sup>b</sup>	-0.28 <sup>a</sup>	-0.37 <sup>a</sup>
Panel C: PNTR as a quasi-natural experiment	-0.06 <sup>b</sup>	-0.08 <sup>c</sup>	-0.01	-0.07 <sup>d</sup>
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Firm FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Notes. Standard errors are clustered at the 4-digit 1987 SIC industry and not reported for space.  $^dp < 0.15, ^cp < 0.10, ^bp < 0.05, ^ap < 0.01.$ 

# Endogeneity issues (4)

Figure 5 - Pre-trends in ETR and dynamics of the effect



# Mechanism (1)

Table 9 - Effect of import competition on corporate tax avoidance: mechanism

	(1) ETR <sub>ijt</sub>	(2) ETR <sub>ijt</sub>	
PNTR <sub>it</sub>	-0.06 <sup>b</sup>	-0.02	
•	(0.03)	(0.03) -0.06 <sup>a</sup>	
$PNTR_{it} \times MNE_{ijt}$		-0.06 <sup>a</sup>	
* *		(0.02)	

Controls	Yes	Yes
Firm FEs	Yes	Yes
Year FEs	Yes	Yes

Notes. Standard errors are clustered at the 4-digit 1987 SIC industry.  $^dp < 0.15$ ,  $^cp < 0.10$ ,  $^bp < 0.05$ ,  $^ap < 0.01$ .

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# Mechanism (2)

Table 10 – Effect of import competition on corporate tax avoidance: mechanism

	(1) ETR <sub>ijt</sub>	(2) ETR <sub>ijt</sub>	(3) ETR <sub>ijt</sub>	(4) ETR <sub>ijt</sub>	(5) intangibles <sub>ijt</sub>
$PNTR_{jt}$	-0.06 <sup>b</sup> (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.03)	0.02 (0.03)
$PNTR_{jt} \times MNE_{ijt}$	,	-0.06 <sup>a</sup> (0.02)	,	,	0.04¢ (0.02)
intangibles <sub>ijt</sub>		,	0.02 (0.01)	0.04 <sup>a</sup> (0.02)	,
intangibles $_{ijt} \times MNE_{ijt}$				-0.06 <sup>b</sup> (0.03)	
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Firm FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Notes. Standard errors are clustered at the 4-digit 1987 SIC industry.  $^dp < 0.15, ^cp < 0.10, ^bp < 0.05, ^ap < 0.01.$ 

# Mechanism (3)

Table 11 – Effect of import competition on corporate tax avoidance: an unintended effect

	(1) TAXHAVEN <sub>ijt</sub>	(2) TAXHAVEN <sup>int</sup>	
PNTR <sub>it</sub>	0.04	3.15	
•	(0.07)	(4.50)	
$PNTR_{jt} \times intangibles_{ijt}$			
Controls	Yes	Yes	
Firm FEs	Yes	Yes	
Year FEs	Yes	Yes	
Nb. of obs.	28,443	4,641	

Notes. Standard errors, in parentheses, are clustered at the 4-digit 1987 SIC industry.  $^dp < 0.15$ ,  $^cp < 0.10$ ,  $^bp < 0.05$ ,  $^ap < 0.01$ .



# Mechanism (4)

Table 12 - Effect of import competition on corporate tax avoidance: an unintended effect

	(1) TAXHAVEN <sup>ext</sup>	(2) TAXHAVEN <sup>int</sup>	(3) sales <sub>ijt</sub>
PNTR <sub>jt</sub>	0.04	3.15	-2,740.44 <sup>b</sup>
	(0.07)	(4.50)	(1,226.00)
$PNTR_{it} \times intangibles_{iit}$			1.44 <sup>b</sup>
,.			(0.70)
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes
Firm FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FEs	Yes	Yes	Yes
Nb. of obs.	28,443	4,641	30,141

Notes. Standard errors, in parentheses, are clustered at the 4-digit 1987 SIC industry.  $^dp < 0.15$ ,  $^cp < 0.10$ ,  $^bp < 0.05$ ,  $^ap < 0.01$ .

