

The Basic Two-Period Model

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1. Environment

The economy is populated by households and a government. They live for two periods, $t = 0$ and $t = 1$, and trade identical consumption goods and public bonds. Public bonds promise their holder one unit of the consumption good in the following period. There is no money in this economy. Agents trade public bonds using consumption goods.

A word on notation: each variable in the model takes a value in period zero and a value in period one, as indicated by their subscript. For example: x_0 and x_1 . A process that is a function of time is called a *time series*. When a symbol omits the subscript, it refers to the entire time series vector: $x = (x_0, x_1)$.

1.1. The Government

The government demands $g = (g_0, g_1)$ consumption goods (*i.e.*, g_0 in period zero and g_1 in period one). To finance its purchases, it charges lump-sum taxes $\tau = (\tau_0, \tau_1)$ on households. Households cannot avoid paying taxes. The pair g and τ characterize *fiscal policy* in this model.

The government also raises revenue from selling new public bonds. In period zero, the price of one bond is q_0 units of the consumption good. Usually $q_0 < 1$: you pay less than one good in $t = 0$, to get one good in $t = 1$. As such,

$$1 + r_0 = \frac{1}{q_0}$$

is the interest rate implied by the public bond's price. In period one, agents have no incentive to save since the world ends in the following period. Since bonds have no demand, we can set its equilibrium price to zero: $q_1 = 0$.

We make two critical assumptions on government behavior. First, it can *credibly* commit to fully repaying previously issued debt. "Credibly" means that households believe in its commitment, and act accordingly. Second, the government indeed never defaults.

The government brings to period zero a debt of b_{-1} bonds, and must therefore come up with b_{-1} consumption goods to pay bondholders. To that end, it can either sell new bonds b_0 and raise $q_0 b_0$ goods in revenue, or run a *primary surplus*. The primary surplus is defined as the difference between tax proceeds and non-interest spending. In this model, it corresponds to the quantity $\tau_0 - g_0$. The government avoids a default in period zero if

$$q_0 b_0 + \tau_0 - g_0 = b_{-1}. \quad (1)$$

The revenue from selling new bonds plus the revenue from taxes in excess of public spending must be enough to redeem old bonds. Since the government will not default, condition (1) represents a budget constraint. It restricts the government's choice of how much to tax, how much to spend, and how much to borrow.

Like in period zero, in period one the government again must pay bondholders, which are now due b_0 units of the consumption good. But, in period one, the government cannot sell new bonds, since there is no demand for them (the bond price is zero $q_1 = 0$, so the government would not raise any revenues anyway). Therefore, to pay bondholders, the government must run a primary surplus of b_0 in period one:

$$\tau_1 - g_1 = b_0. \quad (2)$$

Expression (2) is also a government budget constraint.

1.2. Households

The consumption good is non-durable (households can only enjoy them for a single period), and perishable (agents cannot store them). Households value the consumption good in the period they make use of them. The utility function

$$u(c_0) + \beta u(c_1)$$

captures households' preferences over the amount consumed in period zero c_0 and period one c_1 . Period utility $u(c)$ is an increasing, strictly concave and

twice differentiable function. Parameter $\beta \in (0, 1]$ discounts the flow of future consumption, and therefore captures households' impatience.

Each household receives an endowment of $y = (y_0, y_1)$ consumption goods. You can think of households producing these goods at home; we later model firms, production and labor income more realistically.

We normalize the number of households to one, which avoids the introduction of unnecessary notation. If each household consumes c_0 goods, aggregate consumption will be

$$c_0 \times \text{Number of Households} = c_0 \times 1 = c_0.$$

The same symbol c_0 represents both individual and aggregate consumption. Likewise, (y_0, y_1) represent aggregate production in the economy.

In period zero, each household brings a_{-1} public bonds purchased in the previous period. Since households and the government are the only agents in the model, we restrict the number of bonds initially owned by households to coincide with the number of bonds owed by the government: $a_{-1} = b_{-1}$. Households redeem these a_{-1} bonds for the same number of consumption goods. Add to that their after-tax income $y_0 - \tau_0$ and we find the amount of available goods to each household in period zero. They can use these goods to consume or purchase public bonds from the government. Let a_0 be the household's choice of how many public bonds to purchase. There is no other asset in the economy, so a_0 also represents the household's savings and its net wealth. The following equation is the budget constraint faced by each household in period zero:

$$q_0 a_0 + c_0 \leq a_{-1} + y_0 - \tau_0. \quad (3)$$

Equation (3) restricts the households' decision of how much to consume and how much to save in period zero. In period one, households redeem a_0 public bonds, and do not demand new ones, as the world ends thereafter. Hence:

$$c_1 \leq a_0 + y_1 - \tau_1. \quad (4)$$

Households can borrow too, and the government can lend. While we have referred to b_0 as government "borrowing" and a_0 as household "savings", nothing

precludes these variables from being negative (in which case, the household borrows and the government lends).

Suppose households exhaust their available resources, that is, that their budget constraints hold with equality. By equation (4), the maximum amount of goods a household can repay from previously acquired debt is $y_1 - \tau_1$ (in that case, the household would consume zero goods in period one, $c_1 = 0$). If the household's debt is larger than $y_1 - \tau_1$, the household defaults. Knowing that, potential lenders (other households or the government) refuse to purchase bonds from (*i.e.*, lend to) a household whose debt exceeds this value. Therefore, the largest debt any household can owe is $y_1 - \tau_1$. We incorporate this *borrowing constraint* in the model by establishing a lower bound \underline{a} on period-zero savings a_0 :

$$a_0 \geq \underline{a} = -(y_1 - \tau_1). \quad (5)$$

(If you get confused with signs, think of an example; if after-tax income equals 5 goods, then debt cannot be higher than 5, so net wealth cannot be lower than $\underline{a} = -5$.)

Economists often refer to a household's maximum repayable debt as its *natural borrowing limit*. In our model, the natural borrowing limit is $-\underline{a} = y_1 - \tau_1$. Other choices of borrowing limit $-\underline{a}$ are possible, and often more realistic. However, adopting the natural borrowing limit is a convenient starting point to analyze households' allocation decisions, because any choice that involves a positive consumption in period one ($c_1 > 0$) necessarily satisfies it. Consequently, if we prove that period-one consumption is not zero, we can safely ignore the borrowing limit.

Households decide how much to consume $c = (c_0, c_1)$ and how many bonds to purchase (or issue) a_0 taking into account their budget and borrowing constraints (3)-(5). They take the price of public bonds q_0 as given (*i.e.*, they act *competitively*), and attempt to get as much utility as possible from their choice. Therefore, the choice of how much to consume and save solves the following utility maximization

problem:

$$\begin{aligned}
& \text{Max}_{c \geq 0, a_0} && u(c_0) + \beta u(c_1) && (6) \\
& \text{s.t.} && q_0 a_0 + c_0 \leq a_{-1} + y_0 - \tau_0 && (3) \\
& && c_1 \leq a_0 + y_1 - \tau_1 && (4) \\
& && a_0 \geq \underline{a}. && (5)
\end{aligned}$$

Optimization problems similar to (6) are often referred to as *consumption-savings* problems.

Since u is an increasing, strictly concave function, optimization (6) has a single solution.¹ In that solution, budget constraints (3) and (4) hold with equality - otherwise households could raise consumption and get more utility. Let $c(a_{-1}; q_0, \tau)$ and $a_0(a_{-1}; q_0, \tau)$ be the pair of consumption levels (c_0, c_1) and public bond purchases that solve (6). The arguments underscore how households' choices depend on their initial net wealth, the price of public bonds and taxes.

2. Present-Value Budget Constraints

2.1. Government and Fiscal Policy Sustainability

Let us return to the government's budget constraints, repeated below for convenience:

$$\begin{aligned}
q_0 b_0 + s_0 &= b_{-1} && (1) \\
s_1 &= b_0. && (2)
\end{aligned}$$

($s = \tau - g$ is the primary surplus sequence). Equations (1) and (2) are examples of *sequential* budget constraints ("sequential" because we have one of them in each period).

Sequential budget constraints focus on the interaction between surpluses and wealth. But they also indirectly capture the possibilities of *intertemporal allocation* available to the government. For example: if it wants to lower period-zero surpluses by one ($\Delta s_0 = -1$, Δ means "a change in"), it must issue the

¹We assume income y and initial wealth b_{-1} are large enough so that the household can choose non-negative amounts of consumption goods.

necessary volume of new bonds $\Delta b_0 = 1/q_0 = 1 + r_0$; and then raise period-one surpluses by $\Delta s_1 = \Delta b_0 = 1/q_0$ to pay the additional debt.

It is often useful to represent the restrictions involving current and future surpluses more directly, with a single expression. Replace (2) on (1) to get:

$$b_{-1} = s_0 + q_0 s_1. \quad (7)$$

Equation (7) is the government's *present-value* budget constraint. It immediately shows that $\Delta s_0 = -1$ demands $\Delta s_1 = 1/q_0$.

We say "present-value" because we are converting spending in different points in time to their corresponding value in period zero. Indeed, the value in $t = 0$ of the delivery of X goods in $t = 1$ is $q_0 X$, since any agent can purchase X bonds for that amount, and get the X goods in $t = 1$.¹ In that sense, we can regard q_0 not only as the price of public bonds, but also the price of period-one consumption c_1 relative to period-zero consumption c_0 .

We say "budget constraint" because expression (7) is a sufficient and necessary condition to ensure that the government does not default. Conveniently, it does not depend on the b_0 term, only on fiscal policy objects τ and g through the surplus terms $s = \tau - g$. In that sense, the present-value budget constraint implies and is implied by fiscal policy *sustainability*.

Let us check this important claim. If the government does not default, then s and b_0 must respect the sequential budget constraints (1) and (2). Together, they imply (7). Thus, no default \implies the present-value budget constraint.

In the opposite direction, suppose we have a surplus process $s = (s_0, s_1)$ that satisfies (7). We use the period-zero sequential budget constraint (1) to find the necessary volume of bonds the government needs to issue:

$$b_0 = \frac{b_{-1} - s_0}{q_0}.$$

The above b_0 ensures that the government does not default in period zero. Does

¹This is a *no-arbitrage* argument: If the value was $A > q_0 X$, you could sell the period-one delivery of X goods for A and purchase the required bonds for $q_0 X$ to make a something-for-nothing profit.

it default in period one? By assumption, the surplus pair satisfies (7). So:

$$b_{-1} = s_0 + q_0 s_1 \implies s_1 = \frac{b_{-1} - s_0}{q_0} = b_0.$$

Since $s_1 = b_0$, period-one sequential budget constraint (2) holds. In conclusion, validity of the present-value budget constraint \implies no government default.

2.2. Re-Stating Households' Consumption-Savings Problem

Consider now the sequential budget constraints faced by households, expressions (3) and (4). The conclusions we find above for the government apply somewhat similarly. The sequential budget constraints imply the present-value budget constraint:

$$a_{-1} \geq [c_0 - (y_0 - \tau_0)] + q_0 [c_1 - (y_1 - \tau_1)]. \quad (8)$$

Each term in brackets represents the household's expenditure in excess of its after-tax income (you can think of it as the household's own "primary deficit"). The present value of its excess consumption must be lower or equal to the initial wealth a_{-1} . Intuitively, if it exceeds a_{-1} , then households default in period one.

Like in the government's case, a consumption process $c = (c_0, c_1)$ that satisfies the present-value budget constraint (8) also satisfies the sequential budget constraints, if we choose the right net wealth a_0 . For instance, we can use period-one budget constraint, expressed with equality:

$$a_0 = c_1 - (y_1 - \tau_1). \quad (9)$$

The equivalency between restricting households' consumption choice using sequential or present-value budget constraints opens the door to writing the consumption-savings problem (6) in terms of the c only:

$$\text{Max}_{c \geq 0} \quad u(c_0) + \beta u(c_1) \quad (10)$$

$$\text{s.t.} \quad a_{-1} \geq [c_0 - (y_0 - \tau_0)] + q_0 [c_1 - (y_1 - \tau_1)] \quad (8)$$

$$(a_0 =) c_1 - (y_1 - \tau_1) \geq \underline{a}. \quad (5)$$

(We have used (9) to replace a_0 in the borrowing constraint.¹) The solution

¹(9) is the only level of bond purchases consistent with a consumption choice because the

$c(a_{-1}; q_0, \tau)$ to problem (6) also solves problem (10). We can then use (9) again to recover the optimal demand for public bonds $a_0(a_{-1}; q_0, \tau)$.

3. Ricardian Equivalence

In general terms, *Ricardian equivalence* is the proposition that households' consumption choices are unaffected by the timing of taxation. In this section, we model Ricardian equivalency in our two-period setup and discuss which conditions are key to make it hold. We start with a government that fixes a fiscal policy pair g and $\tau = (\tau_0, \tau_1)$. Fiscal policy is sustainable, therefore the present-value budget constraint (7) is satisfied. We can write it as:

$$[\tau_0 + q_0\tau_1] = b_{-1} + [g_0 + q_0g_1]. \quad (11)$$

On the left, the present value of tax proceeds; on the right, the present value of outlays divided between spending and old debt redemption. Households observe the path of due taxes, and plan how much to consume $c(\tau)$ and how much to save $a_0(\tau)$.¹

Suppose that, still at the beginning of period zero, the government announces a different, *but still sustainable*, path to lump-sum taxes, $\hat{\tau} = (\hat{\tau}_0, \hat{\tau}_1)$. Spending g remains unaltered. How do households revise their consumption plans in response to the government announcement? It turns out that, in the conditions of our two-period model, *they don't*: $c(\tau) = c(\hat{\tau})$. We say that Ricardian equivalence holds.

The key to prove the proposition is to show that different but equally sustainable taxation paths do not change the set of consumption levels affordable by households. Formally, any c that satisfies the constraints of the consumption-savings problem (10) under τ will continue to satisfy them under $\hat{\tau}$, and vice-versa.

Let's check that claim. We start with the present-value budget constraint (8), which holds with equality. We can re-write it as:

$$[c_0 + q_0c_1] + [\tau_0 + q_0\tau_1] - [y_0 + q_0y_1] = a_{-1}.$$

sequential budget constraints hold with equality in the solution of (6).

¹In this section only, I ignore the arguments a_{-1} and q_0 of the optimal solutions for brevity.

The middle term on the left-hand side is the present value of charged taxes. Since both τ and $\hat{\tau}$ are fiscally sustainable, and since g is unchanged, that quantity must stay constant:

$$[\tau_0 + q_0\tau_1] = [\hat{\tau}_0 + q_0\hat{\tau}_1] = b_{-1} + [g_0 + q_0g_1].$$

Therefore, the household's present-value budget constraint is unchanged.

Next, consider the borrowing constraint (5). Since we use the natural borrowing limit, they read:

$$\begin{aligned} c_1 - (y_1 - \tau_1) &= a_0 \geq \underline{a} &= -(y_1 - \tau_1) \\ c_1 - (y_1 - \hat{\tau}_1) &= a_0 \geq \underline{a} &= -(y_1 - \hat{\tau}_1) \end{aligned}$$

Both restrictions above are satisfied whenever $c_1 \geq 0$ (this is how we define the natural borrowing limit!). Hence, the borrowing limit is effectively unchanged.

Since the restrictions of the consumption-savings problem (10) remain the same, the optimal level of consumption cannot be different. In conclusion, $c(\tau) = c(\hat{\tau})$.

3.1. Interpretation

The central idea behind Ricardian equivalence is the fact that households understand how a one-dollar reduction in charged taxes today (or a standalone one-dollar transfer) must be followed by a one-dollar increase plus interest tomorrow (and vice versa). Being the household, you can save the extra dollar, earn the interest, and duly pay the higher tax tomorrow. No reason to change the groceries list. In that sense, critics of transfer-based programs of fiscal "stimulus" often rely on the Ricardian equivalence result as a theoretical basis for their skepticism. Still, it is critical to understand what the proposition says and what it doesn't.

One could precisely summarize what Ricardian equivalence *does* say as follows:

Household's consumption demand curve does not depend on the *timing* of
lump-sum taxes.

The two emphasized terms are key. "Timing" means *when*, not *how much*. Ricardian equivalence does not say that households do not respond to different taxation schemes. If the government halves taxes today but promises the same level

of taxation in the future, households do use the additional resources to raise consumption. If the government announces higher taxes tomorrow, but no transfers today, then households save some more. (Note however that the government exhausts its resources; thus an increase in overall taxes for instance must lead to an increase in spending g too. See (11).) "Lump-sum" means that the proposition excludes taxes that depend on households' actions, like income, consumption and corporate taxes. Unlike these alternative forms of taxation, lump-sum taxes do not change the marginal benefits of these actions; hence, they do not induce changes in household behavior other than because they get wealthier or poorer.

3.2. Critical Assumptions

According to the Ricardian proposition, demand for consumption goods $c(\tau)$ is unresponsive to the timing of taxes, but not the demand for bonds $a_0(\tau)$. If the government sends you a 100-dollar check and you do not spend it, your savings account grows by 100 dollars. If the government charges you an additional 100 dollars in taxes, your savings account diminishes by that amount. One critical assumption behind Ricardian equivalence is that, if necessary, households dispose of the necessary credit to sustain their period-zero consumption level. This has been a given in our baseline case of the two-period model: under the natural borrowing limit (5), households can always borrow if they can repay. If the government charges 100 dollars more in taxes in $t = 0$, households can borrow an additional 100 dollars (plus interest) as lenders understand taxes will be lower by that amount in $t = 1$. The natural borrowing limit will not bind under the new path of taxes if it didn't under the old one.

However, more restrictive borrowing constraints can bind and thus prevent households from keeping their consumption path unaltered. For instance, a commonly used restriction is the *no-borrowing constraint* $\underline{a} = 0$. In our model, when the borrowing constraint binds, period-zero consumption is given by equation (9):

$$c_0 = a_{-1} - q_0 \underline{a} + y_0 - \tau_0$$

So if a fiscal policy change $\Delta\tau$ is small enough so that the borrowing constraint continues to bind, $\Delta c_0 = \Delta\tau_0$. In the presence of a binding borrowing constraint, an increase in taxation leads to a reduction in current consumption since households cannot issue more debt to pay for the higher taxes. On the opposite direction,

lower taxes (or standalone transfers) might raise consumption. As such, discussions of whether adjustments to fiscal policy will stumble on Ricardian behavior often center around the extent to which households are credit constrained. Obviously, one can only answer that question empirically, on a case-by-case basis.

Also key for Ricardian equivalence to hold is the functioning of public finances, in particular the assumption that fiscal policy is credible and sustainable. In the context of real debt (ie, public bonds that pay a consumption good), fiscal sustainability is the same as no default. Our model captures best a government that is fully credible to raise enough revenue to eventually repay its debts (e.g. Switzerland). Deficits today lead to surpluses tomorrow. In practice, however, governments do default. Even if they don't, households might *believe* that they can. The credible communication of a fiscal policy plan is just as important to household behavior as the policy path itself. Whenever the government lacks the credibility of debt repayment, lower taxes today do not imply higher taxes tomorrow. Ricardian equivalence fails.

It is easy to take the assumptions of fiscal credibility and sustainability for granted, especially because most modern governments finance themselves primarily through *nominal*, not real debt. Agents redeem nominal debt for money, which is, in most cases, created by the government. Hence, unsustainable fiscal policy paths do not necessarily lead to the dramatic outcome of a government default, but rather to a decline in the value of money (inflation). We come back to that topic later. For now, just note that it is not clear how frequently and to which extent governments can and do promise fully sustainable changes in fiscal policy; and that our use of the expression "fiscal sustainability" in this section is *more restrictive* than the government not defaulting in practice.

Lastly, contrary to our model's assumptions, households are not identical, and tax and transfers are seldom unconditional. The more realistic income, capital and consumption taxes are a sure way to break Ricardian equivalence. Moreover, households with different characteristics are likely to react differently to a change in fiscal policy. We have discussed above the case of credit-constrained households. One might conjecture that older individuals will not be as inclined to save a public transfer in order to pay for a future increase in taxation. Perhaps the same applies to unemployed workers. In all, the lack of household heterogeneity is a major simplification imposed by our model.

4. Intertemporal Choice and Equilibrium

We want to characterize the *competitive equilibrium* of our two-period economy. The competitive equilibrium is defined by market prices and quantities that cover two properties. First, agents choose the quantities optimally, taking prices as given. The "taking prices as given" part makes the equilibrium "competitive". Second: all markets clear, which means that quantities optimally supplied equal quantities optimally demanded.

When computing an equilibrium, we fix fiscal policy (g, τ) . We will later study how the government can choose fiscal policy to generate the "best" equilibrium possible. For now, we take g and τ as given, assuming that they respect the present-value budget constraint (7).

4.1. Household Optimality

Consider households' optimal choices, $c(a_{-1}; q_0, \tau)$ and $a_0(a_{-1}; q_0, \tau)$. Because they solve the consumption-savings problem (6) (or (10)), they must satisfy the first-order optimality condition associated with that problem. In an interior solution (*i.e.*, in a solution with $c_0 > 0$, $c_1 > 0$), that condition is the *Euler equation*

$$q_0 u'(c_0) = \beta u'(c_1). \quad (12)$$

We interpret the Euler equation (12) as a condition of consumption smoothing. Since the utility function u is increasing and concave, *marginal utility* u' is a positive, but *decreasing* function.¹ Intuitively, consuming more always makes the household "happier", but the amount of extra "happiness" an additional unit of consumption provides declines as it consumes more. Equating marginal utility therefore means balancing value over time. If you are lost in the desert, do not empty the waterskin on the first night.

To prove (12) is the first-order condition for optimality, consider the following variational argument. The utility gain of marginally increasing period-one consumption by Δc_1 is $\beta u'(c_1) \Delta c_1$. According to the present-value budget constraint (8), to increase period-one consumption by Δc_1 , the household must give up

¹Technically, marginal utility could be zero even though utility is increasing. Here, I am assuming $u' > 0$.

$\Delta c_0 = -q_0 \Delta c_1$ units of period-zero consumption.

$$\begin{aligned} a_{-1} &= [c_0 - (y_0 - \tau_0)] + q_0 [c_1 - (y_1 - \tau_1)] \\ \Delta a_{-1} &= \Delta [c_0 - (y_0 - \tau_0)] + q_0 \Delta [c_1 - (y_1 - \tau_1)] \\ 0 &= \Delta c_0 + q_0 \Delta c_1 \end{aligned}$$

The utility loss of reducing period-zero consumption is

$$u'(c_0) \Delta c_0 = -q_0 u'(c_0) \Delta c_1.$$

For a choice of c to be optimal, the marginal gain cannot be lower or higher than the marginal loss. Thus, $q_0 u'(c_0) \Delta c_1 = \beta u'(c_1) \Delta c_1$, as we wanted to show.

The Euler equation (12) establishes a positive relationship between period-zero and period-one consumption.

$$c_0 \uparrow \implies u'(c_0) \downarrow \implies u'(c_1) \downarrow \implies c_1 \uparrow$$

To find the actual solution $c(a_{-1}; q_0, \tau)$ to the consumption-savings problem, we impose the fact that the present-value budget constraint must hold with equality. We find the pair (c_0, c_1) that satisfies the Euler equation and that guarantees that households exhaust their available resources. Lastly, we can compute the optimal choice of period-zero savings $a_0(a_{-1}; q_0, \tau)$ using the sequential budget constraint (9).

4.2. The Competitive Equilibrium

In equilibrium, prices adjust so that markets clear. In the consumption goods market, the inelastically supplied quantity of goods y coincides with the government's demand g and households' optimal demand $c(b_{-1}; q_0, \tau)$:

$$c_0(b_{-1}; q_0, \tau) + g_0 = y_0 \tag{13}$$

$$c_1(b_{-1}; q_0, \tau) + g_1 = y_1. \tag{14}$$

(Recall $a_{-1} = b_{-1}$.) In the bonds market, the volume issued by the government coincides with that demanded by households:

$$a_0(b_{-1}; q_0, \tau) = b_0. \tag{15}$$

We now show that if one of these markets clears, the other two will clear as well. First, if the bonds market clears, the market for period-one consumption will also clear. Indeed, from the sequential budget constraints (2) and (4):

$$c_1 + \tau_1 - y_1 = a_0 = b_0 = \tau_1 - g_1.$$

The terms on the left and right imply (14).

Second, if the market for consumption goods clears in period zero, the market for bonds will also clear. We again see this from the sequential budget constraints (1) and (3). Subtracting the former from the latter:

$$q_0 \underbrace{(a_0 - b_0)}_{\text{Excess Demand Bond Market}} + \underbrace{c_0 + g_0 - y_0}_{\text{Excess Demand Goods Market}} = a_{-1} - b_{-1} = 0.$$

If the excess demand for goods is zero (*i.e.*, if demand = supply), the expression above implies $a_0 = b_0$.

The fact that we only need to clear one market is an application of *Walras' Law*, which states that, in an N -market economy, clearing of the first $N - 1$ markets implies the clearing of the last one. Although we have three markets in our model, by now you should be convinced that the market for public bonds is really a market for period-one consumption goods. (This is the rationale behind the present-value budget constraints (7) and (8); they focus on consumption goods only).

It is convenient that we only need to clear one market, since the only price in the model is the price of public bonds q_0 (obviously this is not a coincidence). To find the equilibrium value of q_0 , replace (13) and (14) in the Euler equation:

$$q_0(y, g) = \frac{1}{1 + r_0(y, g)} = \beta \frac{u'(y_1 - g_1)}{u'(y_0 - g_0)}. \quad (16)$$

Intuitively, equilibrium bond price $q_0(y, g)$ must provide households the due incentive to allocate consumption intertemporally in a way consistent with the availability of goods. For example, suppose that period-zero endowment y_0 is much lower than period one's y_1 . Under which circumstances would households accept to consume so much more in $t = 1$ than in $t = 0$ (so that $u'(c_1)/u'(c_0)$ is low)? According to the Euler equation: when bond prices are too low, or interest

rates too high.

The equilibrium bond price (16) amplifies the scope of Ricardian equivalence. In the previous section, we saw that households' *demand curve* for goods are unresponsive to the timing of fiscally sustainable taxes. But demand curves are not the same as quantities demanded *in equilibrium*. In principle, the latter could change if bond prices were sensitive to taxes. Expression (16) proves this is not the case.

4.3. The Fiscal Multiplier

Given a change in public spending Δg_0 , economists are often interested in the resulting change in aggregate output Δy_0 . The change in aggregate output per unit of public spending $\Delta y_0 / \Delta g_0$ is called the *fiscal multiplier*. In the simplified model we study in the section, aggregate output y_0 is exogenous, and unaffected by public spending. The fiscal multiplier is zero. In the following chapters we examine models that assume more elaborate production technologies and therefore allow for non-zero fiscal multipliers.

For now, a few aspects of the fiscal multiplier concept are worth noting. First, economists often limit the definition of fiscal multipliers to *exogenous* changes in public spending. "Exogenous" means that the change does not arise as a feedback response to other variables, but rather as a change in the level of spending *given* other variables.

There is no single fiscal multiplier. Even if we restrict the definition of a fiscal multiplier to encompass exogenous variations in public spending, several factors can influence their effect on the economy. Each possibility leads to a different multiplier. Here are a few examples: is the fiscal shock anticipated? Is it long-lasting? Does the government demand consumption or investment goods? We explore some of these cases in the following chapters.

Lastly, the fiscal multiplier is dual to the crowding-out effect of public spending. That is, the more output grows in response to an increase in public spending, the less private consumption needs to *decline*. You can see this from the market-clearing condition in the goods market (13):

$$\frac{\Delta c_0}{\Delta g_0} = \frac{\Delta y_0}{\Delta g_0} - 1$$

When the fiscal multiplier is zero, each additional good purchased by the government reduces private aggregate demand by the same amount. (In this chapter's model we only consider private consumption; we later consider private investment as well.) Based on this idea, economists sometimes claim that expansion of public spending when the economy has no spare capacity (or "slack") is detrimental to households.

Exercises

Exercise 1. We study the isoelastic utility function

$$u(c) = \frac{c^{1-\frac{1}{\gamma}} - 1}{1 - \frac{1}{\gamma}} \quad \gamma > 0. \quad (17)$$

(a) Apply L'Hôpital's rule to show that when $\gamma \rightarrow 1$, the utility function converges to $\log(c)$.

(b) Express the Euler equation (12) as

$$\frac{c_1}{c_0} = [\beta(1 + r_0)]^\gamma.$$

The left-hand side is the gross rate of consumption growth $1 + g_1^c$. Use the first-order Taylor approximation of the log function

$$\log(1 + x) \approx x \quad \text{when } x \approx 0$$

to conclude that

$$\gamma [\log \beta + r_0] = g_1^c.$$

The equation above show that parameter γ governs the *elasticity of intertemporal substitution*, defined by $\Delta g_1^c / \Delta r_0$.

(c) Explain intuitively why the interest rate is increasing in consumption growth.

Exercise 2. This exercise guides you through the complete solution of the consumption-savings problem (6), under the isoelastic utility function (17) and a general borrowing limit \underline{a} (*i.e.* we no longer assume the natural borrowing limit

$$-(y_1 - \tau_1)).$$

(a) Suppose the household has enough wealth a_{-1} to support positive consumption in period zero. Why can we guarantee positive consumption in *both* periods? Hint: consider the marginal utility of consumption as it approaches zero.

(b) Set up the Lagrangian of the optimization problem (6). Compute the first-order conditions to conclude that

$$q_0 u'(c_0) \geq \beta u'(c_1) \quad (= \text{if } a_0 > \underline{a}).$$

(c) Start by assuming that the borrowing constraint $a_0 \geq \underline{a}$ does not bind. Use the Euler equation to express c_1 as a function of c_0 ; replace that expression on the present-value budget constraint to find solutions to c_0 and c_1 , when the borrowing constraint does not bind.

(d) Replace your solution for c_0 in the period-zero sequential budget constraint (3) to find the required public bond position a_0 . Does it satisfy the borrowing constraint? If it does, we are done. If it does not, then the borrowing solution binds.

(e) Use the sequential borrowing constraints to find c_0 and c_1 when the borrowing constraint binds.

Exercise 3. In this exercise we study the government's present-value budget constraint in a model with T periods.

(a) Suppose the sequential budget constraint

$$q_t b_t + s_t = b - t - 1$$

holds. Show that present-value budget constraint

$$b_{t-1} = \sum_{j=t}^T q_{t,j-1} s_j$$

holds, where $q_{t,j} = \prod_{i=t}^j q_i$. How do you interpret $q_{t,j}$? What limit condition analogous to $b_1 = 0$ in the two-period model is necessary?

(b) Show that, if the present-value budget constraint holds in every period, the

sequential budget constraint holds as well (*i.e.*, the government never defaults).

Exercise 4. Prove Walras' Law (equilibrium in the goods market in period zero implies equilibrium in period one) using the two present-value budget constraints (7) and (8). Assume $q_0 > 0$.

Exercise 5. In this example, the government does not demand final goods $g = 0$ and enters period zero with no debt $b_{-1} = 0$. Households' endowment is $y_0 = 5$, $y_1 = 10$, the utility function is $u(c) = \log(c)$ and $\beta = 1$. The government transfers one consumption good to household in period zero, $\tau_0 = -1$.

- (a) Find the equilibrium price of bonds and interest rate.
- (b) Find the equilibrium consumption in both periods.
- (c) What is the fiscally sustainable level of public transfer in period one?
- (d) Compute households' savings a_0 at the end of period zero; and verify it is enough to finance their consumption and taxes in the following period.
- (e) Consider a different fiscal policy. Instead of a one consumption good transfer, suppose the government enacts a one-period *tax* $\tau_0 = 1$. How do you change your answers to (a), (b), (c) and (d)?
- (f) Consider now the existence of a *no-borrowing constraint*. A no-borrowing constraint is a borrowing constraint involving a zero debt limit: $-a = 0$. That is, we change equation (5) to $a_0 \geq 0$. Consider again the fiscal policy change in τ you found in item (e). At the same bond price as item (a), can the household keep its consumption process unchanged? Does Ricardian equivalence hold?
- (g) Under the no-borrowing constraint, is it possible to find an equilibrium with positive bond prices $q_0 > 0$ and period-zero positive taxes $\tau_0 > 0$?

Exercise 6. The economy is populated by a unit measure of identical households, subject to the natural borrowing limit. The government announces a new period-zero transfer of one consumption good, but only to half the population. It credibly commits to increase taxation in period one, so that the new fiscal policy remains sustainable. Based on that information, can you say that Ricardian equivalence continues to hold for sure? Can you say that it breaks? Explain.

Exercise 7. The government adopts a feedback rule to public spending:

$$g_0 = \theta y_0 + e_0,$$

where θ is a model parameter and e_0 is exogenously determined.

(a) Compute equilibrium output as a function of aggregate consumption c_0 and the shock e_0 .

(b) Suppose $\theta > 0$. For an exogenous reason, aggregate output grows by Δc_0 . Compute $\Delta y_0 / \Delta g_0$. Your favorite financial media commentator measures $\Delta y_0 / \Delta g_0 > 0$ and, based on his findings, argues that in the future the government should raise public spending in times of low output. Does the model support the commentator's claim?