

Consistent future approximation in continuous time

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April 3, 2017

Abstract

Analysis of the “consistent future approximation” method of Den Haan, Kobielarz, and Rendahl (2015) applied for the deterministic Ramsey model in continuous time. I show that while the method is easy to set up, solving the nonlinear system requires nontrivial methods for even a simple system, and once solved, the resulting residuals of the Euler equation are large compared to collocation methods, but still small enough in absolute magnitude to make the model useful in practice, especially for making an initial guess about functional forms in collocations methods.

See the repository at <https://github.com/tpapp/exact-present> for the accompanying code in JULIA.

Introduction. Continuous time models have been used extensively in macroeconomics, finance, and other fields¹ However, while in finance it is common practice to solve continuous models numerically,² in macroeconomics practical applications of numerical methods usually focus on discrete time problems, despite the fact that some commonly used textbooks on numerical methods address continuous-time methods.³

While one of the reasons for this may be unfamiliarity with continuous-time building blocks such as Itô and Lévy processes,⁴ the other difficulty is finding a solution to the resulting functional equations. When using projection methods, functional forms that describe optimal choices and values are approximated using function families with finitely many parameters. Since in continuous time there is no general contraction mapping equivalent to value iteration in discrete time, usually the only option is to solve these problems using general nonlinear solvers, which are not guaranteed to converge, especially when the starting point is not close enough to the solution.⁵

Den Haan, Kobielarz, and Rendahl (2015) propose a method for finding approximate solutions to discrete time systems described by a functional equation, by approximating policy functions with a linear (or similarly simple) form and imposing consistency between present and future policies around a particular state. In this short note I show that this method can be applied to continuous time systems, and examine its practicality and accuracy in the context of one of the simplest continuous time models, the deterministic Ramsey model. The advantage of this model is that it is relatively well-studied,⁶ and despite its simplicity, it is sufficient for making the following points about the proposed method in continuous time:

1. The method is fast, but the resulting nonlinear system may have multiple roots even in a simple setting, so that it must be solved with care, preferably from a good initial guess. In this note I used continuation methods, starting from around the steady state.

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¹References are too numerous to list here. See Acemoglu (2008) for a textbook based almost entirely on continuous time models, Dixit, Pindyck, and Davis (1996) for applications to investment. Applications in portfolio choice and finance started with Merton (1971).

²See Hull (2009) for commonly used methods

³Eg Judd (1998) and Miranda and Fackler (2002). Recent exceptions include Kaplan, Moll, and Violante (2016) and related papers.

⁴For an introduction, see Øksendal and Sulem (2005).

⁵Kushner and Dupuis (2013) presents an alternative method, using discrete-time approximations of continuous processes.

⁶Aruoba, Fernandez-Villaverde, and Rubio-Ramirez (2006) compare a variety of numerical methods for the discrete-time version of this model with a stochastic productivity.

2. The method less accurate compared to collocation methods: Euler equation residuals deteriorate very quickly with distance from the steady state. For example, at half the steady state capital, the relative residual was 10^{-2} , while a simple collocation method with 10 Chebyshev polynomials can easily achieve 10^{-4} . However, it is still more than accurate enough as a starting point for a nonlinear solver, so it can be used as an initial guess about the functional form for collocation methods.
3. The method is good at capturing the general shape of the policy function even near singularities, where collocation methods usually break down without transformations.

Setup. Consider a deterministic Ramsey model in continuous time, with CRRA utility function (IES θ), discount rate ρ , production function

$$F(k) = Ak^\alpha - \delta k$$

and capital accumulation equation

$$\dot{k}_t = F(k_t) - c_t \quad (1)$$

The most frequently used form of the Euler equation, usually obtained from the Hamiltonian, is⁷

$$\frac{\dot{c}_t}{c_t} = \frac{1}{\theta} (F'(k_t) - \rho) \quad (2)$$

First, I rewrite this into a recursive form. We are solving for the policy function $c(k)$, and thus

$$\dot{c} = c'(k)\dot{k} = c'(k)(F(k) - c(k))$$

where I have used (1) and dropped time indices. Plugging into (2), we obtain

$$\frac{c'(k)}{c(k)} (F(k) - c(k)) = \frac{1}{\theta} (F'(k) - \rho) \quad (3)$$

We cast this into the form

$$c'(k)(F(k) - c(k)) = \frac{1}{\theta} (F'(k) - \rho)c(k) \quad (4)$$

which should be easier to manipulate. We are looking for the solution $c(k)$ to (4).

Methodology. The key to the method outlined in Den Haan, Kobielarz, and Rendahl (2015) is the following:

1. fix k ,
2. assume a functional form for $c(k)$ around this point,
3. solve (4) by imposing that this form holds “locally”, as described below.

For simplicity, we choose a linear form⁸

$$c(\tilde{k}; k) = c_0(k) + c_1(k)(\tilde{k} - k) \quad (5)$$

First, from (4) and (5) we obtain

$$c_1(k)(F(k) - c_0(k)) = \frac{1}{\theta} (F'(k) - \rho)c_0(k) \quad (6)$$

Implicit differentiation by k yields

$$c'_1(k)(F(k) - c_0(k)) + c_1(k)(F'(k) - c'_0(k)) = \frac{1}{\theta} \left[F''(k)c_0(k) + (F'(k) - \rho)c'_0(k) \right] \quad (7)$$

⁷Eg see Acemoglu (2008, Chapter 8).

⁸Den Haan, Kobielarz, and Rendahl (2015) argue that higher-order approximations would give even better accuracy. However, since the most difficult part is solving the resulting nonlinear system, there is a trade-off between accuracy and programmer time. That said, exploring Padé approximations would be interesting.

The method makes two assumptions. First, we impose that the approximation is *valid locally* around k :

$$c'_0(k) = c_1(k) \quad (8)$$

This would hold if the $c(\tilde{k}; k)$ was tangent to the approximated policy function $c_0(k)$. Also, we impose that for a small change in k , there is *no first-order change in the approximating slope* $c_1(k)$:

$$c'_1(k) = 0 \quad (9)$$

This is a crucial assumption, as it basically imposes no curvature. The accuracy of the method will be determined by how realistic these assumptions are. Using (8) and (9), (7) becomes

$$c_1(k)(F'(k) - c_1(k)) = \frac{1}{\theta} \left[F''(k)c_0(k) + (F'(k) - \rho)c_1(k) \right] \quad (10)$$

For each k , we solve the system of (5) and (10). Note that in contrast to perturbation methods, (10) still takes the local curvature of F into account, contributing to the accuracy of the method.

Numerical methods. Note that the system (6) and (10) is quadratic. Using random starting points and quasi-Newton methods,⁹ I generally found *three* solutions: the “right” one ($c_1(k), c_0(k) > 0$), a trivial one $c_1(k) = c_0(k) = 0$, and an economically nonsensical one (with $c_1(k) < 0$). Consequently, reformulating the problem and investing time in finding good initial guesses is beneficial. Using (3) rules out the zero solution. Also note that since the steady state capital can be obtained as

$$k_s = \left(\frac{\delta + \rho}{A\alpha} \right)^{1/(\alpha-1)}$$

and $c_s = c_0(k) = F(k_s)$, an exact solution can be easily solved for at the steady state. However, even with seemingly sensible initial guesses,¹⁰ the quasi-Newton solver frequently converged the nonsensical root, so I used the following simple continuation method:

1. for a k near k_s , use initial guesses $c_0(k) = c_s$, and $c_1(k)$ from (10),
2. for other k , find a nearby \tilde{k} for which we have solved the problem, and use $c_0(\tilde{k}), c_1(\tilde{k})$.

For comparison, I also solve (3) using a collocation method with 10 Chebyshev polynomials, using a quasi-Newton solver with linesearch and the initial guess

$$c(k) = c(k_s) \frac{k}{k_s} \quad (11)$$

This is very accurate and will be useful for comparison. I refer to the collocation solution as the “exact” solution $\hat{c}(k)$, since the approximation error has no practical relevance.

Solution and discussion. I solve on the range $k \in (0.2k_s, 2k_s)$, with parameters $A = 1, \alpha = 0.3, \rho = 0.02, \delta = 0.05, \theta = 2$. This solution is referred to in the graphs as “collocation”, while the method of Den Haan, Kobielarz, and Rendahl (2015) is labeled as “consistent future”.

Figure 1 shows the policy function. The deviation from the exact solution is small but visible, with the exact solution method overpredicting consumption both above and below the steady state. More importantly, as can be seen in Figure 2 which shows the same comparison for $c_1(k)$ and $\tilde{c}'(k)$, the consistent future method overpredicts $c'(k)$ above and underpredicts it below the steady state, respectively. Also, note that (9) is violated since $c_1(k)$ appears to have significant curvature.

Figure 3 checks (8) by plotting $c_1(0)$ and $c'_0(k)$, calculating the latter from a local quadratic curve. While (8) holds at the steady state by construction, it is violated significantly the further we move from the steady

⁹Unless stated otherwise, in this note I use quasi-Newton methods with automatic differentiation (Revels, Lubin, and Papamarkou 2016).

¹⁰Such as (11) which works very well for collocation.

state: as k approaches 0, $c'_0(k) \approx 2c_1(k)$. If we are aiming for a globally accurate solution, (8) turns out to be an unreasonable assumption. Figure 4 shows $c_0(k)$, but with tangents drawn using $c_0(k)$ and $c_1(k)$. This is another graphical illustration of the violation of (8).

Figures 5 and 6 show the residual of (3) for the consistent future and collocation methods, respectively. Graphing this residual is a standard procedure of evaluating collocation methods (Boyd 2001; Judd 1998), since the residual can be considered as a unitless prediction error. Note that because of the errors discussed above, the consistent future method displays relatively low accuracy when compared to collocation methods, however, the residual is still small for practical purposes.

One remarkable feature of the consistent future method is that because of its locality, it does not break down as $k \rightarrow 0$, in contrast to collocation methods, which require transformations or more gridpoints in areas of high curvature. This again makes it ideal for initial guesses and exploratory analysis.

Conclusion. I examined the accuracy of the method proposed by Den Haan, Kobielarz, and Rendahl (2015) in the context of a simple continuous time Ramsey model, and found that it is much less accurate than collocation methods. Note, however, that the method is still reasonably accurate, and since it can be implemented very easily, it may be a good first pass approach to study the solution of functional equations. In particular, it can be used for exploratory analysis, or to provide initial guesses for nonlinear solvers in collocation methods, and since it can be evaluated at any points, it can also be used to check the assumptions about functional forms that underlie more complex methods, such as sparse grid approximations (Judd et al. 2014). The only part which requires more care is solving the nonlinear system. With these in mind, the method may be a useful addition to our toolkit for solving functional equations in economics.

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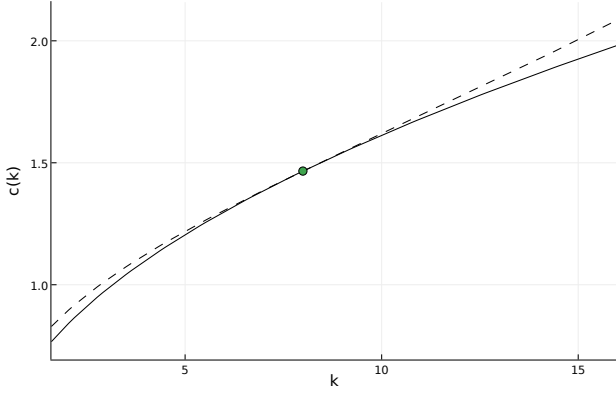


Figure 1: Policy functions (consistent future: dashed, collocation: solid, steady state: dot).

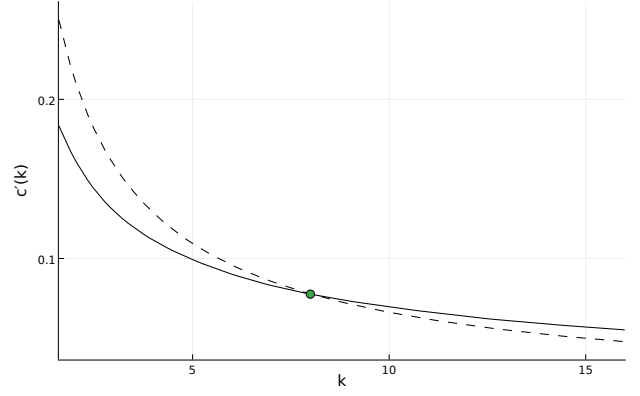


Figure 2: $c_1(k)$ for consistent future approximation (dashed), $c'_1(k)$ for collocation (solid), steady state (dot).

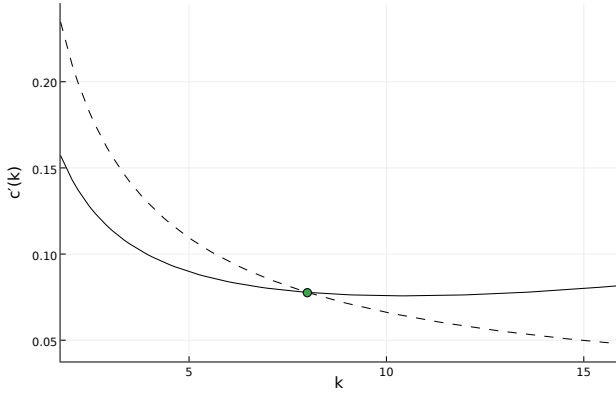


Figure 3: $c_1(k)$ (solid) and $\partial c_0(k)/\partial k$ (dashed), the latter calculated from a local quadratic approximation.

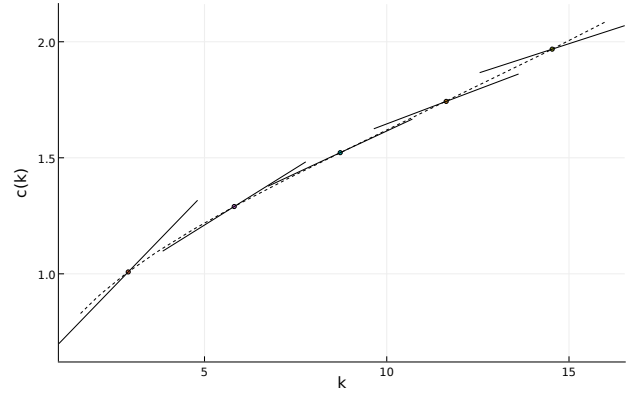


Figure 4: Policy function $c_0(k)$, with tangents drawn according to $c_1(k)$.

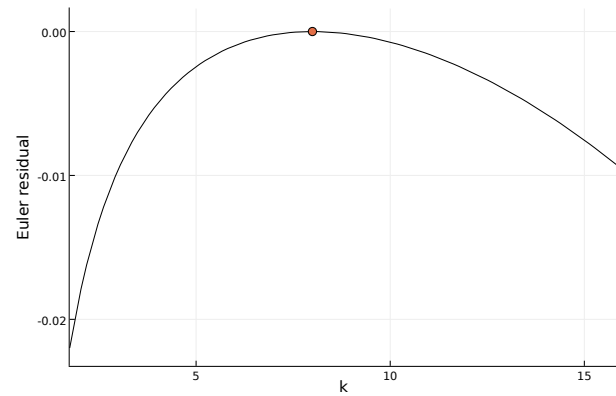


Figure 5: Residual of equation (3) for the consistent future method.

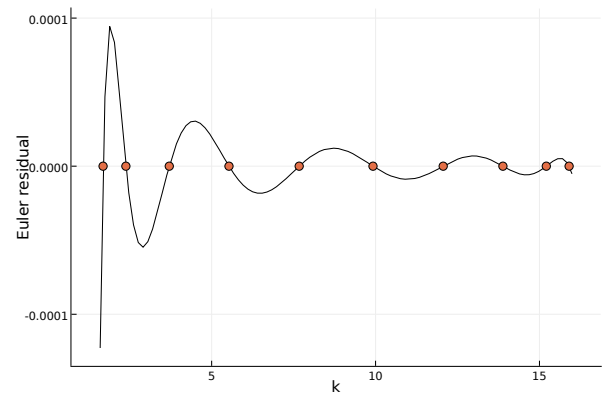


Figure 6: Residual of equation (3) for the collocation method, with collocation nodes.