

## Economic Research Note

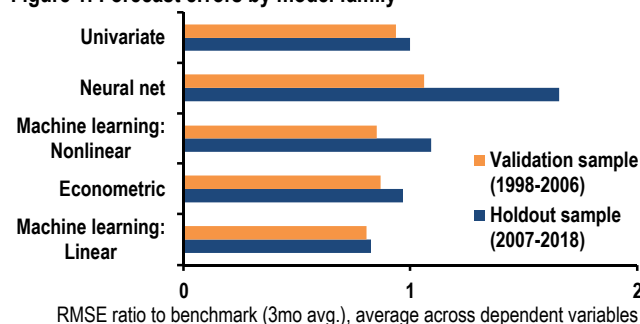
# Machine learning for macro: What you really need to know

- We cut through the hype and identify machine learning tools that macro forecasters should have in their toolbox
- Linear dimension reduction methods like principal components analysis and regularization methods like ridge regression work the best in small monthly or quarterly datasets
- Other ML and AI tools like random forests, boosted trees, support vector machines, and neural nets do no better and sometimes worse
- We publish nowcasters, recession risk trackers, and other tools based on the best techniques every day in the [Real-time Quant Econ Monitor](#)

In a special report last week ([Machine learning for macro: What you need to know](#)), we detailed our research on the machine learning and artificial intelligence techniques that will be most useful to macroeconomic forecasters, and we summarize our results in this short note. In the last several years, artificial intelligence has made headlines by learning to drive cars, answer phone calls, and beat humans in chess, go, and Jeopardy. Yet macroeconomists have typically approached forecasting with simpler econometric tools built upon the workhorse Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) linear regression. To evaluate whether the new machine learning (ML) and artificial intelligence (AI) methods can improve our forecasting toolkit, we conduct an extensive horserace across a broad set of econometric and machine learning methods to predict a variety of macroeconomic data.

As in our [prior work in 2016](#), we found that relatively simple, linear tools like OLS, principal components analysis (PCA), ridge regression, and the lasso perform best in our context of short macroeconomic time series (Figure 1). The most flexible nonlinear ML and AI tools like random forests, boosted trees, support vector machines, and neural nets do no better, and sometimes much worse. Although these tools may be quite successful in learning how to recommend movies based on millions of ratings or detect credit card fraud from billions of transactions, they seem to add little value in our tiny datasets of a few hundred monthly observations. Their performance around the financial crisis was particularly bad in some cases, as these tools struggled to extrapolate outside the range of their prior experience.

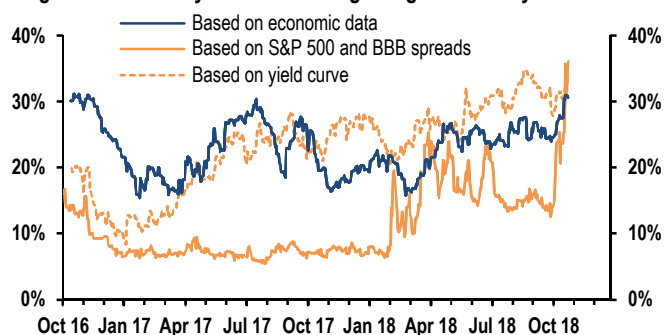
Figure 1: Forecast errors by model family



Source: J.P. Morgan

In short, we doubt that forecasters working with monthly or quarterly data have much to gain by adopting the most flexible AI methods. But the most successful linear ML methods may also be unfamiliar to many of our readers. So we demonstrate how these tools work in more detail, and we show how to use them to build forecasting models that use all available data, update in real time, and predict probabilities as well as mean forecasts. These methods power our nowcasters, recession risk trackers, and other models that we publish daily in the [US Real-time Quant Econ Monitor](#) (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Probability of recession beginning within one year



Source: Various government and non-government sources, J.P. Morgan

## A horserace

The [full report](#) details the list of forecasting methods that we test, the macroeconomic variables that we forecast, and the grid search walk-forward cross-validation method that we use to optimize hyperparameters and evaluate model performance. Cutting to the chase, Table 1 lists the single model that performed best in predicting each of our six dependent variables during one-step-ahead validation periods through 2006, after choosing the best hyperparameters for each model type. For five out of our six dependent variables, the best-performing models were some combination of principal components analysis and a linear model like the ridge regression, elastic net, or the dynamic factor model. The pattern of linear model outperformance continues in our holdout period from 2007 to 2018.

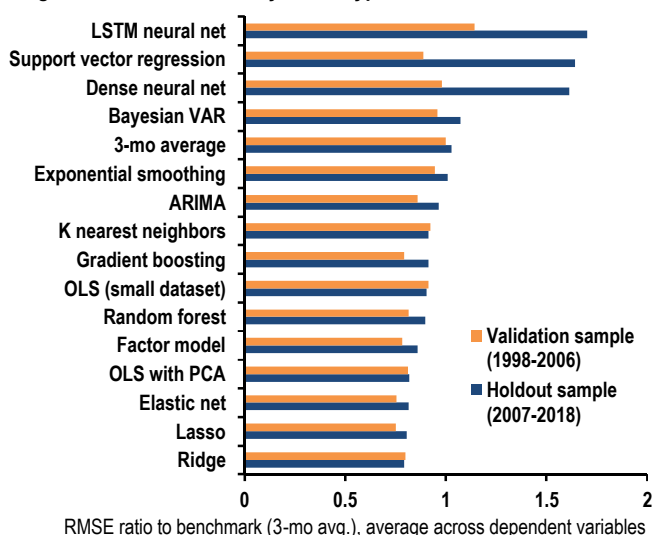
**Table 1: Best performing models in validation and holdout samples**

Target Variable		Validation sample	Holdout sample
Non-farm Payrolls	1-mo delta	Ridge with PCA	Elastic Net with PCA
	6-mo delta	Elastic Net	OLS with PCA
Retail Sales	1-mo delta	Factor Model	Random Forest
	6-mo delta	Factor Model	Factor Model
Core Capital Goods	1-mo delta	Random Forest	Elastic Net
	6-mo delta	Factor Model	OLS with PCA

Source: J.P. Morgan

Figure 1 places the RMSEs for all models across the six dependent variables on the same scale by dividing each model's RMSE by the RMSE of the 3-month average for that dependent variable in the holdout sample period. For each model family, we take the average RMSE across the individual models, where each model is represented by its single best hyperparameter combination. On average, the models in the linear family have the lowest error in both the training and holdout period. Figure 3 breaks out Figure 1 by showing the ratio of the RMSEs to the benchmark for each individual model, again averaged across our six dependent variables. The top five models in the holdout sample are all linear. To be fair, the best of the nonlinear machine learning models are not far behind, with the random forest and gradient boosting machine in sixth and eighth place. The differences between the RMSEs of these models are often minor in practical terms, but there is no sign of the nonlinear models doing better than the linear ones.

**Figure 3: Forecast errors by model type**

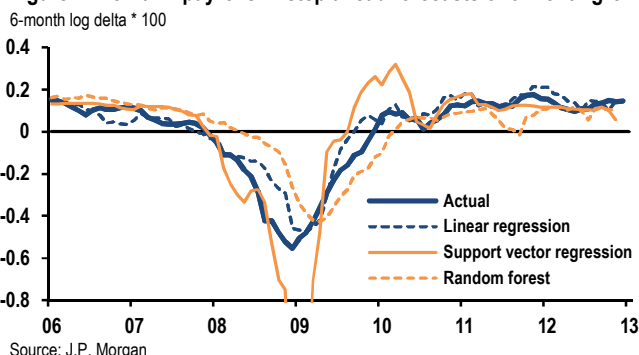


Source: J.P. Morgan

Some of the other, most flexible nonlinear models do badly in the holdout period, however, with the support vector regression and both kinds of neural nets producing holdout errors that are twice as large as the best performing linear models. Figure 4 further illustrates this poor performance by showing the 1-step-ahead forecasts for 6-month growth in nonfarm

payrolls, using the best hyperparameters chosen from the validation sample for the linear regression on principal components, the support vector machine, and the random forest. The linear regression does not too badly compared to the actual data—by no means does it foresee the crisis, but once the recession began in early 2008, the linear model began to predict further job losses. The random forest also eventually began to predict job losses, but it was slower to come around to this realization. The support vector regression, on the other hand, began making predictions in late 2008 that turned out to be wildly too pessimistic, before swinging around and making overly optimistic predictions early in the recovery.

**Figure 4: Nonfarm payrolls: 1-step ahead forecasts of 6-month growth**



Source: J.P. Morgan

We suspect that the linear models perform best because they were better able to make sensible extrapolations based on past experience, while the nonlinear models struggled with this task. Random forests and other tree-based methods, for example, are fundamentally ill-equipped to extrapolate: because their predictions are essentially an average over the outcome of the most similar observations in the training set, they responded only slowly as the crisis deepened in 2008. In contrast, both the linear regression and the support vector regression are able to extrapolate beyond the observations they have seen in the training data. But the SVR is essentially extrapolating nonlinear functions outside the range over which they were estimated, which in this case results in wildly overshooting both the trough in 2009 and the recovery in 2010.

## Understanding the linear models

Although the most successful linear techniques are on the simpler end of the range of models we consider, we suspect many of our readers are still less familiar with these tools than with workhorse OLS regressions. We thus provide a brief example to demonstrate how they work.

Table 2 shows results from five different models that predict monthly growth in core capital goods orders based on ten different surveys of businesses: the Institute for Supply Management (ISM) surveys for the manufacturing and nonmanu-

facturing sectors, plus eight different surveys from regional Federal Reserve Banks. Before diving into the results, think for a moment what we should expect a “good” forecasting model would look like here. All of the business surveys are individually positively correlated with capital goods orders, and all are likely to capture a somewhat different selection of firms, so each could capture some unique bit of information not included in the others. Thus, while some of the surveys might be more useful than others, a sensible model would likely place a positive coefficient on each of them.

**Table 2: Coefficients in predicting capital goods orders**

RHS variable	OLS	PCA	Ridge	LASSO	Elastic-Net
ISM Manufacturing	1.495	0.091	0.119	0.708	0.572
ISM Nonman.	-0.587	0.083	0.010	0	0
Philly Fed Mfg.	0.386	0.088	0.091	0.020	0.162
Empire State Mfg.	-0.398	0.080	0.064	0	0
Kansas City Mfg.	0.194	0.079	0.095	0.053	0.131
Richmond Mfg.	-0.300	0.087	0.058	0	0
Dallas Mfg.	-0.559	0.091	0.072	0	0
NY Fed Nonman.	-0.236	0.079	0.034	0	0
Richmond Nonman.	-0.283	0.075	-0.026	-0.076	-0.265
Dallas Nonman.	0.931	0.089	0.079	0	0.131
Constant	0.084	0.084	0.084	0.084	0.084

Source: Census Bureau, ISM, Federal Reserve, J.P. Morgan. Figures are coefficients in model predicting monthly growth in core capital goods orders using normalized versions of the listed series. The estimation sample is 2007-2018, and hyperparameters for the models are set to illustrative values.

The first column of Table 2, however, shows that if we include all ten surveys in a simple Ordinary Least Squares regression in the data since 2007, they produce erratic and implausible coefficients. This is the classic “multicollinearity” problem with OLS—including multiple highly correlated variables on the right-hand-side produces erratic results. Table 2 also shows how the four linear machine learning models each handle this problem a bit differently. For the principal components model in the table, we calculate the first component of the surveys and include the component in an OLS regression to predict capital goods orders. We then compute the implied coefficient on each survey in the regression by taking the loading that each survey receives in the component and multiplying this by the coefficient on the component in the regression. This procedure shows that each survey effectively receives a small, positive coefficient in the regression.

We also see that the ridge regression (which penalizes the sum of squared coefficients in the OLS regression) produces somewhat similar results, with most of the surveys receiving small positive coefficients but one a small negative. The lasso (which penalizes the absolute values of the coefficients instead of their squares) has the effect of setting some of the coefficients to zero, while still allowing a broad range of values across the nonzero coefficients. The elastic net looks like a combination of the ridge and lasso results in that it still sets

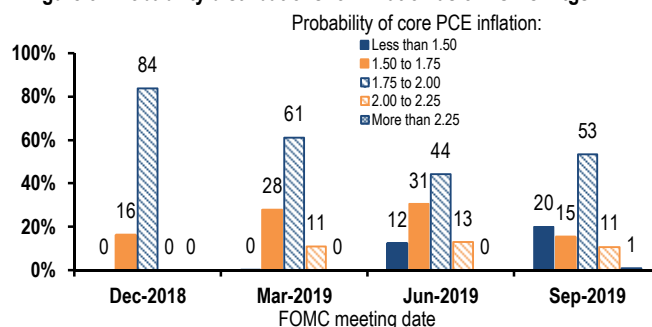
some coefficients to zero, but spreads magnitudes more evenly across the nonzero coefficients.

One final consideration, however, is how useful the models will be in interpreting the data we receive each day as we fill in the jagged edge. Financial markets react to the implications of each data point we receive in real time, and they do not have the luxury of waiting until all data for the month are available before considering their implications. The lasso in Table 2 would thus be at a disadvantage. For example, it would entirely ignore the Empire State manufacturing survey and the New York Fed's services survey, which are among the very first of the business surveys we receive each month. When our clients ask us the meaning of a move in the Empire State index, the lasso would have no answer for them. Thus, in general, we tend to prefer models like the PCA and ridge regressions in the table, which we can use to help us interpret every data release in real time.

## Conclusions and next steps

We conclude with practical recommendations for real-world forecasters. Although the most flexible nonlinear methods may not add much value for forecasters working with monthly or quarterly data, tools are available to build forecasting models that make use of all available data, update in real time, and predict probabilities as well as mean forecasts. In the [full report](#), we demonstrate how to build models like this in both Eviews and Python, and we discuss the pros and cons of these and related packages. The models in our [Quant Econ Monitor](#), which include predicted probabilities that update every day with new data (Figure 5), are based on these methods. We also discuss promising avenues for future research, including models that allow for regime changes and parameter shifts and using new and alternative data to monitor risks and vulnerabilities.

**Figure 5: Probability distributions for inflation as of FOMC mtgs**



Source: Various government and non-government sources, J.P. Morgan

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