

United States

The Mortgage Analyst

Credit Strategy Research

Forecasting the mortgage basis

OAS and mortgage basis have pros and cons as valuation metrics

Two valuation measures commonly used by MBS investors are the option adjusted spread (OAS) and the mortgage basis. The two metrics have offsetting advantages and disadvantages. The basis – defined as the spread between a par 30-year mortgage yield and a par Treasury yield – has the advantage of simplicity: its calculation does not require the use of a complex prepayment model. A disadvantage of the basis, though, is that it does not account for the fact that the duration and convexity of a current coupon mortgage changes over time. While today it may be reasonable to calculate mortgage basis as the spread between a mortgage rate and a 10-year Treasury rate, in earlier time periods a comparison to a 5-year or shorter maturity Treasury rate was more appropriate. In our study, we analyze and forecast the mortgage basis, taking into account changes to mortgage duration and convexity as well as other fixed income market benchmarks.

Mortgage basis looks close to fair given tight swap spreads...

The mortgage basis currently appears roughly in line with long run patterns. While the raw basis is tighter than historical average levels, this is largely explained by tightening of other financial variables such as swap spreads and rates volatility. After adjusting for these factors, mortgage basis appears just a few basis points tight, an effect possibly due to the combination of low supply and high Federal Reserve demand for MBS. A similar result obtains for option adjusted spreads, which also look close to expected levels vs. long run relationships with other fixed income spreads.

...but a widening of swap spreads could imply a widening basis

While mortgage spreads look close to the level we would expect given the currently tight level of swap spreads, if swap spreads gradually widen from here, as we expect, we would predict that the mortgage basis would also have to widen in sympathy.

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Mortgage basis vs. OAS: competing valuation measures

Mortgage backed securities investors typically evaluate bond yields as a spread relative to a benchmark rate such as Treasuries or swaps. Two common spread measures are the option adjusted spread (OAS), and the basis (defined as the simple difference between a par mortgage yield and a par Treasury yield). Exhibit 1 shows the historical trends in mortgage basis and mortgage OAS over the past 15 years, and Exhibit 2 shows the difference between these measures. The broad trends in the OAS and the basis are similar, though, per Exhibit 2, the series do not move exactly in parallel¹.

OAS has a number of potential conceptual advantages to the mortgage basis.

- Basis compares mortgage yields to an arbitrarily chosen Treasury yield (e.g., the 10-year yield, or the 5-year yield, or the average of the two), whereas OAS automatically accounts for the timing of MBS cash flows.
- 2. OAS modeling accounts for interest rate volatility while basis does not. For example, a decline in expected rate volatility will typically cause mortgage rates and thus basis to compress. The tight basis in this case could be mis-interpreted as a signal that mortgages are too rich, whereas in fact it is a proper reflection of the reduced option costs associated with mortgages in a low volatility environment.

While OAS enjoys potential theoretical advantages over the mortgage basis as a valuation measure, the basis has strong offsetting advantages: namely, the basis is simple to compute, and is not dependent on complex prepayment and yield curve models. Exhibit 3 shows current coupon mortgage OAS time series from three different industry models; the differences across the series highlights the sensitivity of OAS to modeling assumptions.

For these reasons the mortgage basis remains a popular series for MBS investors. In this note, we develop a model of the mortgage basis, accounting for market factors such as swap spreads and rates volatility. We find that, relative to these drivers, the basis, like the OAS, now appears close to fair or expected value. However, if these drivers of basis widen gradually during 2014, as we expect, then mortgage spreads could widen as well.

Exhibit 1: Mortgage basis and mortgage OAS are now slightly below long run average levels

30-year mortgage-vs.-Treasury OAS and mortgage-vs.-Treasury basis (par mortgage yield minus average of 5- and 10-year Treasury yields)



Source: Haver and Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research

Exhibit 2: The spread between mortgage OAS and mortgage basis has varied over time

Spread between 30-year mortgage OAS and mortgage basis

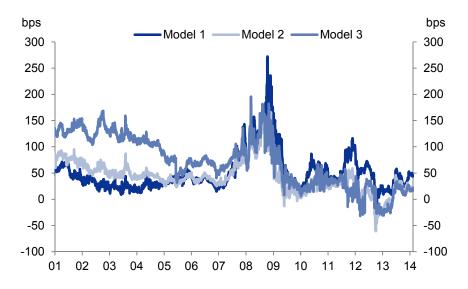


Source: Haver and Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research

¹ For a more detailed description of mortgage OAS, see, e.g., "What is negative mortgage OAS telling us", The Mortgage Analyst, February 21, 2013, https://360.gs.com/gs/portal?action=action.doc&d=14532974.

Exhibit 3: OAS estimates from different industry prepay models show similar but not identical long-run trends

30-year current coupon mortgage option adjusted spread to treasuries



Source: Haver, Bloomberg and Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research

Mortgage basis is simpler than OAS, but comes with a cost

A key advantage of the mortgage basis is that it does not require the use of complex prepayment and interest rate diffusion models. However, this simplicity comes at cost, as the basis does not account for changes in the rates environment or in mortgage prepay behavior. We describe some of the specific potential biases in the mortgage basis measure, and identify controls that can be used in a basis model.

The optimal Treasury rate for calculating basis changes over time

In Exhibit 1, basis was calculated as the mortgage rate minus the average of the 5- and 10-year Treasury rates. Other analysts have defined the basis as just the mortgage rate minus the 10-year Treasury rate. Which is the right Treasury rate for benchmarking mortgages? In principal, we want to choose the Treasury instrument which has a duration comparable to a mortgage duration, but this choice has varied significantly over time. Thus, some of the variation in a mortgage basis calculated as mortgage rate minus 10-year Treasury rate will come from the fact that, in certain periods, a mortgage and a 10-year Treasury instrument may have very different durations.

Exhibit 4 shows that Treasury bond durations have increased over time as Treasury rates have fallen. The reason for this pattern is that, as coupons decline, the final principal payment at year 10 becomes a larger fraction of total bond cashflow. Exhibit 5 shows that mortgage durations have also varied over time, but not nearly in parallel with Treasury durations. In addition to the coupon effect, which influences MBS as well as Treasuries, mortgage durations change due to changes in borrower prepay behavior and curve slope.

By interpolating between the 2-year, 5-year and 10-year Treasury durations, we can estimate the effective Treasury maturity that matches a current coupon mortgage maturity; this is shown in Exhibit 6. The effective maturity was 5 years in 2003, a time when borrowers refinanced quickly and mortgage durations were short. Currently the effective

maturity is above 8 years. There is clearly no single definition of the basis that will match mortgage vs. Treasury durations in all time periods; we have chosen the 5- and 10-year blended Treasury rate as a compromise that will be reasonable in most but not all periods.

Mortgage convexity and option cost change over time

A large fraction of the spread between mortgage rates and Treasury rates reflects compensation for the negative convexity of mortgages. This convexity, too, changes over time, for two reasons: (a) interest rate volatility varies over time and (b) borrower behavior with respect to exercising the prepayment option varies over time.

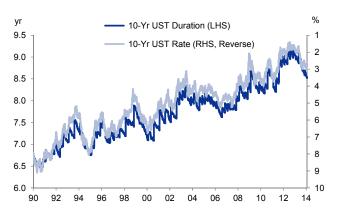
Exhibit 7 shows implied interest rate volatilities; the 2y10y vol varied from less than 70 bp to more than 150 bp over this period. Higher volatility, of course, raises the cost of the prepay option, which should flow through to a wider mortgage basis. Exhibit 8 shows the change in borrower refinance rates from 2003 to 2013. In 2003, borrowers 150-200 bp in the money to refinance prepaid at 74 CPR, vs. 38 CPR for borrowers in 2013. The slower prepayments in 2013 should make option costs smaller than in pre-crisis periods, which would tighten mortgage basis. An OAS model can, in principal, account for these changes to the value of the refinance option over time, while a simple mortgage basis does not.

Mortgage basis vs. mortgage OAS: A case study

A sample time period when OAS sent a clearer pricing signal than mortgage basis was late 2012-early 2013, in the early months of QE3. Exhibit 1 shows that OAS reached historically unprecedented negative levels at that time, a strong indication that pricing may have been rich. By comparison, the mortgage basis post-QE3 was comparable to 2006 basis levels, possibly suggesting to some observers that mortgage prices were still within a historically normal range. This basis comparison, though, fails to account for the low rate volatilities and flat yield curve of 2006. After accounting for these factors, mortgage spreads in 2006 look normal, but they look too tight post-QE3.

Exhibit 4: 10-year Treasury bond duration increases as 10-year Treasury coupon rates decrease

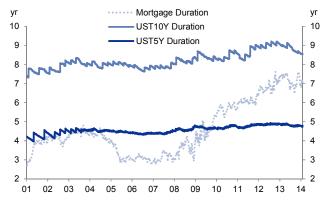
10-year Treasury duration vs. 10-year Treasury rate



Source: Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research

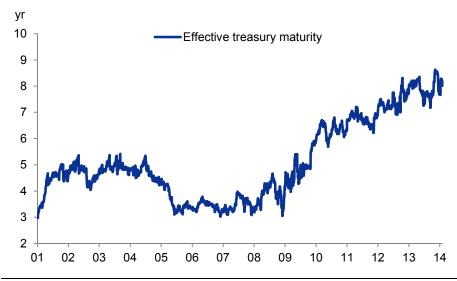
Exhibit 5: Mortgage durations have not moved in parallel with Treasury durations

5-year Treasury duration, 10-year Treasury duration, and current coupon mortgage duration



Source: Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research

Exhibit 6: The optimal Treasury maturity for benchmarking mortgages has increased Estimated effective Treasury maturity matching a 30-year current coupon mortgage duration



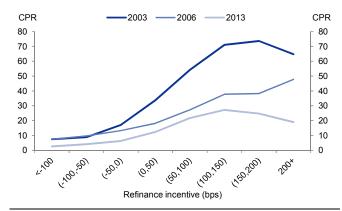
Source: Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research

Exhibit 7: Interest rate volatility varies over time... Implied normal ATM swaption volatilities



Source: Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research

Exhibit 8: ... as does borrower refinance behavior Annualized conditional prepayment rate vs. refinance incentive, 2003, 2006, and 2013 exposure years, 30-year conventional mortgages, 12-30 WALA



Source: eMBS, Freddie Mac and Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research

Forecast model suggests basis close to fair, but may widen in 2014

Model of the mortgage basis suggests spreads now close to fair...

Mortgage spreads are driven by, among other factors, the returns on competing spread products. Exhibit 9, for example, shows the general tendency of mortgage basis to widen and tighten along with swap spreads. Swap spreads have been interpreted as a liquidity

premium²: in crisis periods such as 1998 or 2009, investors have high demand for liquid Treasury bonds, and both swap-vs.-Treasury and mortgage-vs.-Treasury spreads widen.

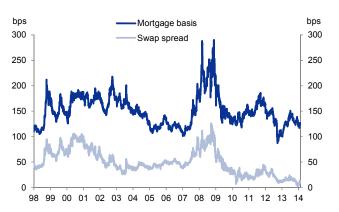
Exhibit 10 shows the results of a regression model that predicts mortgage basis, using a model incorporating 5-year swap spreads, IG credit spreads, 2s10s Treasury curve slope, 1y x 2y swaption volatility, and MBA refinance index levels. The curve slope, volatility, and refinance index measures were included to help correct for the potential limitations of the mortgage basis discussed above.

The regression model was fit using data through 6/2007, and then applied out-of-sample to data beyond that time period. The in-sample adjusted R-squared for the regression is 94%. All the predictor variables are positively correlated with mortgage basis: as swap spread or credit spread widens, or as the yield curve steepens, or as rates volatility or the refi index increase, the mortgage basis is predicted to widen.

Actual basis was tighter than predicted basis in the months after the QE1 and QE3 announcements, suggesting that the Fed MBS purchases lowered mortgage rates, as intended. As of the most recent data point, though, the regression model suggests actual basis is only 5bp tighter than model predicted basis. Alternative model specifications and estimation time periods generally point to the same conclusion, that basis is now just a few bp tight to the level one would predict given the current market environment.

Exhibit 9: Mortgage basis has been correlated with swap vs. Treasury spreads

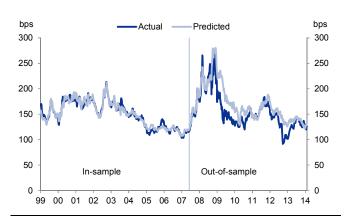
Mortgage basis (mortgage yield minus average of 5- and 10year Treasury yields) and 5-year swap spread (5-year swap rate minus 5-year Treasury rate)



Source: Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research

Exhibit 10: Mortgage basis appears close to level predicted by regression model vs. swap spreads, credit spread, curve slope, swaption volatility, and refinance index

Actual mortgage basis vs. regression model predicted basis



Source: Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research

...but the model implies basis would widen if swap spreads widen

While mortgage basis looks close to expected levels conditional on current swap spreads, Exhibit 9 shows that these swap spreads are themselves unusually low now by historical standards. In the December 2013 Fixed Income Monthly³, our rates strategists describe swap spreads as currently being low relative to what would be predicted based on present macro-economic conditions, citing market technical factors that could be driving tight swap

² M. Grinblatt, "An Analytic Solution for Interest Rate Swap Spreads", *International Review of Finance*, September 2001.

³ "Key Questions for the Macro Rates Investor", December 2013 Fixed Income Monthly, https://360.gs.com/gs/portal/?action=action.doc&d=16195178.

spreads. Their macro model implies about 30 bp of widening in 10-year swap spreads through 2016 from current levels.

From Exhibit 9, each upturn in swap spreads appears to be correlated with a larger magnitude upturn in mortgage basis. Regression models suggest that mortgage basis tends to widen 1.2 bp for every 1.0 bp widening of swap spreads. Combining this 1.2x regression coefficient with a 30 bp projected widening of swap spreads would imply 36 bp widening of mortgage basis over the next few years, a large move. However, there are potentially offsetting factors which work in the opposite direction. For example, credit spreads are positively correlated with mortgage basis, and we are projecting a tightening of credit spreads going forward ("Growth fears are an opportunity to get long CDX IG", Credit Notes, February 6, 2014). We also expect a flattening of the Treasury 2s10s curve from 250 bp today to 125 bp by 2016, which, according to the regression model, should also contribute to tightening of the mortgage basis. Taking all factors into account, a gradual mortgage basis widening of 10-20 bp is suggested.

Of course, historical regression models can never be treated as conclusive, and this is particularly the case in the present context, given the large changes that have occurred in the MBS market over the past decade. Thus, predictions from the model above should necessarily be interpreted with a wide confidence interval around the point forecast. Nevertheless, the model can be useful in highlighting the observations that (a) mortgage spreads now appear close to fair value relative to market fundamentals, but (b) mortgage spreads are highly correlated with other market spreads, and thus could be vulnerable to a cheapening across competing spread products.

Marty Young

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