Alternative Perspectives on Stabilization Policy

The Federal Reserve’s job is to take away the punch bowl just as the party gets going.

—William McChesney Martin

What we need is not a skilled monetary driver of the economic vehicle continuously turning the steering wheel to adjust to the unexpected irregularities of the route, but some means of keeping the monetary passenger who is in the back seat as ballast from occasionally leaning over and giving the steering wheel a jerk that threatens to send the car off the road.

—Milton Friedman

How should government policymakers respond to the business cycle? The two quotations above—the first from a former chairman of the Federal Reserve, the second from a prominent critic of the Fed—show the diversity of opinion over how this question is best answered.

Some economists, such as William McChesney Martin, view the economy as inherently unstable. They argue that the economy experiences frequent shocks to aggregate demand and aggregate supply. Unless policymakers use monetary and fiscal policy to stabilize the economy, these shocks will lead to unnecessary and inefficient fluctuations in output, unemployment, and inflation. According to the popular saying, macroeconomic policy should “lean against the wind,” stimulating the economy when it is depressed and slowing the economy when it is overheated.

Other economists, such as Milton Friedman, view the economy as naturally stable. They blame bad economic policies for the large and inefficient fluctuations we have sometimes experienced. They argue that economic policy should not try to fine-tune the economy. Instead, economic policymakers should admit their limited abilities and be satisfied if they do no harm.
This debate has persisted for decades, with numerous protagonists advancing various arguments for their positions. It became especially relevant as economies around the world sank into a recession in 2008. The fundamental issue is how policymakers should use the theory of short-run economic fluctuations developed in the preceding chapters.

In this chapter we ask two questions that arise in this debate. First, should monetary and fiscal policy take an active role in trying to stabilize the economy, or should policy remain passive? Second, should policymakers be free to use their discretion in responding to changing economic conditions, or should they be committed to following a fixed policy rule?

18-1 Should Policy Be Active or Passive?

Policymakers in the federal government view economic stabilization as one of their primary responsibilities. The analysis of macroeconomic policy is a regular duty of the Council of Economic Advisers, the Congressional Budget Office, the Federal Reserve, and other government agencies. As we have seen in the preceding chapters, monetary and fiscal policy can exert a powerful impact on aggregate demand and, thereby, on inflation and unemployment. When Congress or the president is considering a major change in fiscal policy, or when the Federal Reserve is considering a major change in monetary policy, foremost in the discussion are how the change will influence inflation and unemployment and whether aggregate demand needs to be stimulated or restrained.

Although the government has long conducted monetary and fiscal policy, the view that it should use these policy instruments to try to stabilize the economy is more recent. The Employment Act of 1946 was a landmark piece of legislation in which the government first held itself accountable for macroeconomic performance. The act states that “it is the continuing policy and responsibility of the Federal Government to . . . promote full employment and production.” This law was written when the memory of the Great Depression was still fresh. The lawmakers who wrote it believed, as many economists do, that in the absence of an active government role in the economy, events like the Great Depression could occur regularly.

To many economists the case for active government policy is clear and simple. Recessions are periods of high unemployment, low incomes, and increased economic hardship. The model of aggregate demand and aggregate supply shows how shocks to the economy can cause recessions. It also shows how monetary and fiscal policy can prevent (or at least soften) recessions by responding to these shocks. These economists consider it wasteful not to use these policy instruments to stabilize the economy.

Other economists are critical of the government’s attempts to stabilize the economy. These critics argue that the government should take a hands-off approach to macroeconomic policy. At first, this view might seem surprising. If our model shows how to prevent or reduce the severity of recessions, why
do these critics want the government to refrain from using monetary and fiscal policy for economic stabilization? To find out, let’s consider some of their arguments.

**Lags in the Implementation and Effects of Policies**

Economic stabilization would be easy if the effects of policy were immediate. Making policy would be like driving a car: policymakers would simply adjust their instruments to keep the economy on the desired path.

Making economic policy, however, is less like driving a car than it is like pilot- ing a large ship. A car changes direction almost immediately after the steering wheel is turned. By contrast, a ship changes course long after the pilot adjusts the rudder, and once the ship starts to turn, it continues turning long after the rudder is set back to normal. A novice pilot is likely to oversteer and, after noticing the mistake, overreact by steering too much in the opposite direction. The ship’s path could become unstable, as the novice responds to previous mistakes by making larger and larger corrections.

Like a ship’s pilot, economic policymakers face the problem of long lags. Indeed, the problem for policymakers is even more difficult, because the lengths of the lags are hard to predict. These long and variable lags greatly complicate the conduct of monetary and fiscal policy.

Economists distinguish between two lags that are relevant for the conduct of stabilization policy: the inside lag and the outside lag. The **inside lag** is the time between a shock to the economy and the policy action responding to that shock. This lag arises because it takes time for policymakers first to recognize that a shock has occurred and then to put appropriate policies into effect. The **outside lag** is the time between a policy action and its influence on the economy. This lag arises because policies do not immediately influence spending, income, and employment.

A long inside lag is a central problem with using fiscal policy for economic stabilization. This is especially true in the United States, where changes in spending or taxes require the approval of the president and both houses of Congress. The slow and cumbersome legislative process often leads to delays, which make fiscal policy an imprecise tool for stabilizing the economy. This inside lag is shorter in countries with parliamentary systems, such as the United Kingdom, because there the party in power can often enact policy changes more rapidly.

Monetary policy has a much shorter inside lag than fiscal policy because a central bank can decide on and implement a policy change in less than a day, but monetary policy has a substantial outside lag. Monetary policy works by changing the money supply and interest rates, which in turn influence investment and aggregate demand. Many firms make investment plans far in advance, however, so a change in monetary policy is thought not to affect economic activity until about six months after it is made.

The long and variable lags associated with monetary and fiscal policy certainly make stabilizing the economy more difficult. Advocates of passive policy argue
that, because of these lags, successful stabilization policy is almost impossible. Indeed, attempts to stabilize the economy can be destabilizing. Suppose that the economy’s condition changes between the beginning of a policy action and its impact on the economy. In this case, active policy may end up stimulating the economy when it is heating up or depressing the economy when it is cooling off. Advocates of active policy admit that such lags do require policymakers to be cautious. But, they argue, these lags do not necessarily mean that policy should be completely passive, especially in the face of a severe and protracted economic downturn, such as the recession that began in 2008.

Some policies, called **automatic stabilizers**, are designed to reduce the lags associated with stabilization policy. Automatic stabilizers are policies that stimulate or depress the economy when necessary without any deliberate policy change. For example, the system of income taxes automatically reduces taxes when the economy goes into a recession: without any change in the tax laws, individuals and corporations pay less tax when their incomes fall. Similarly, the unemployment-insurance and welfare systems automatically raise transfer payments when the economy moves into a recession because more people apply for benefits. One can view these automatic stabilizers as a type of fiscal policy without any inside lag.

### The Difficult Job of Economic Forecasting

Because policy influences the economy only after a long lag, successful stabilization policy requires the ability to accurately predict future economic conditions. If we cannot predict whether the economy will be in a boom or a recession in six months or a year, we cannot evaluate whether monetary and fiscal policy should now be trying to expand or contract aggregate demand. Unfortunately, economic developments are often unpredictable, at least given our current understanding of the economy.

One way forecasters try to look ahead is with **leading indicators**. As we discussed in Chapter 10, a leading indicator is a data series that fluctuates in advance of the economy. A large fall in a leading indicator signals that a recession is more likely to occur in the coming months.

Another way forecasters look ahead is with **macroeconomic models**, which have been developed both by government agencies and by private firms. A macroeconomic model is a model that describes the economy quantitatively, rather than just qualitatively. Many of these models are essentially more complicated and more realistic versions of the dynamic model of aggregate demand and aggregate supply we learned about in Chapter 15. The economists who build macroeconomic models use historical data to estimate the model’s parameters. Once a model is built, economists can simulate the effects of alternative policies. The model can also be used for forecasting. After the model’s user makes assumptions
about the path of the exogenous variables, such as monetary policy, fiscal policy, and oil prices, the model yields predictions about unemployment, inflation, and other endogenous variables. Keep in mind, however, that the validity of these predictions is only as good as the model and the forecasters’ assumptions about the exogenous variables.

**CASE STUDY**

**Mistakes in Forecasting**

“Light showers, bright intervals, and moderate winds.” This was the forecast offered by the renowned British national weather service on October 14, 1987. The next day Britain was hit by its worst storm in more than two centuries.

Like weather forecasts, economic forecasts are a crucial input to private and public decisionmaking. Business executives rely on economic forecasts when deciding how much to produce and how much to invest in plant and equipment. Government policymakers also rely on forecasts when developing economic policies. Unfortunately, like weather forecasts, economic forecasts are far from precise.

The most severe economic downturn in U.S. history, the Great Depression of the 1930s, caught economic forecasters completely by surprise. Even after the stock market crash of 1929, they remained confident that the economy would not suffer a substantial setback. In late 1931, when the economy was clearly in bad shape, the eminent economist Irving Fisher predicted that it would recover quickly. Subsequent events showed that these forecasts were much too optimistic: the unemployment rate continued to rise until 1933 when it hit 25 percent, and it remained elevated for the rest of the decade.¹

Figure 18–1 shows how economic forecasters did during the recession of 2008–2009, the most severe economic downturn in the United States since the Great Depression. This figure shows the actual unemployment rate (in red) and several attempts to predict it for the following five quarters (in green). You can see that the forecasters did well when predicting unemployment one or two quarters ahead. The more distant forecasts, however, were often inaccurate. The November 2007 Survey of Professional Forecasters predicted a slowdown, but only a modest one: the U.S. unemployment rate was projected to increase from 4.7 percent in the fourth quarter of 2007 to 5.0 percent in the fourth quarter of 2008. By the May 2008 survey, the forecasters had raised their predictions for unemployment at the end of the year, but only to 5.5 percent. In fact, the unemployment rate was 6.9 percent in the last quarter of 2008. The forecasters became more pessimistic as the recession unfolded, but still not pessimistic enough. In November 2008, they predicted that the unemployment rate would rise to 7.7 percent in the fourth quarter of 2009. In fact, it rose to about 10 percent.

¹Kathryn M. Dominguez, Ray C. Fair, and Matthew D. Shapiro, “Forecasting the Depression: Harvard Versus Yale,” *American Economic Review* 78 (September 1988): 595–612. This article shows how badly economic forecasters did during the Great Depression, and it argues that they could not have done any better with the modern forecasting techniques available today.
The Great Depression of the 1930s and the Great Recession of 2008–2009 show that many of the most dramatic economic events are unpredictable. Private and public decisionmakers have little choice but to rely on economic forecasts, but they must always keep in mind that these forecasts come with a large margin of error.

The Failure of Forecasting During the Great Recession The red line shows the actual unemployment rate from 2007 to 2010. The green lines show the unemployment rate predicted at various points in time. For each forecast, the symbols mark the current unemployment rate and the forecast for the subsequent five quarters. Note that the forecasters failed to predict the substantial rise in the unemployment rate.

Data from: The unemployment rate is from the U.S. Department of Labor. The predicted unemployment rate is the median forecast in the Survey of Professional Forecasters.

Ignorance, Expectations, and the Lucas Critique

The prominent economist Robert Lucas once wrote, “As an advice-giving profession we are in way over our heads.” Even many of those who advise policymakers would agree with this assessment. Economics is a young science, and there is still much that we do not know. Economists cannot be completely confident when they assess the effects of alternative policies. This ignorance suggests that economists should be cautious when offering policy advice.

In his writings on macroeconomic policymaking, Lucas has emphasized that economists need to pay more attention to the issue of how people form expectations of the future. Expectations play a crucial role in the economy because
they influence all sorts of behavior. For instance, households decide how much to consume based on how much they expect to earn in the future, and firms decide how much to invest based on their expectations of future profitability. These expectations depend on many things, but one factor, according to Lucas, is especially important: the policies being pursued by the government. When policymakers estimate the effect of any policy change, therefore, they need to know how people’s expectations will respond to the policy change. Lucas has argued that traditional methods of policy evaluation—such as those that rely on standard macroeconometric models—do not adequately take into account the impact of policy on expectations. This criticism of traditional policy evaluation is known as the Lucas critique.\(^2\)

An important example of the Lucas critique arises in the analysis of disinflation. As you may recall from Chapter 14, the cost of reducing inflation is often measured by the sacrifice ratio, which is the number of percentage points of GDP that must be forgone to reduce inflation by 1 percentage point. Because estimates of the sacrifice ratio are often large, they have led some economists to argue that policymakers should learn to live with inflation, rather than incur the large cost of reducing it.

According to advocates of the rational-expectations approach, however, these estimates of the sacrifice ratio are unreliable because they are subject to the Lucas critique. Traditional estimates of the sacrifice ratio are based on adaptive expectations, that is, on the assumption that expected inflation depends on past inflation. Adaptive expectations may be a reasonable premise in some circumstances, but if the policymakers make a credible change in policy, workers and firms setting wages and prices will rationally respond by adjusting their expectations of inflation appropriately. This change in inflation expectations will quickly alter the short-run tradeoff between inflation and unemployment. As a result, reducing inflation can potentially be much less costly than is suggested by traditional estimates of the sacrifice ratio.

The Lucas critique leaves us with two lessons. The narrow lesson is that economists evaluating alternative policies need to consider how policy affects expectations and, thereby, behavior. The broad lesson is that policy evaluation is hard, so economists engaged in this task should be sure to show the requisite humility.

The Historical Record

In judging whether government policy should play an active or passive role in the economy, we must give some weight to the historical record. If the economy has experienced many large shocks to aggregate supply and aggregate demand, and if policy has successfully insulated the economy from these shocks, then the case for active policy should be clear. Conversely, if the economy has experienced few large shocks, and if the fluctuations we have observed can be traced to inept economic

policy, then the case for passive policy should be clear. In other words, our view of stabilization policy should be influenced by whether policy has historically been stabilizing or destabilizing. For this reason, the debate over macroeconomic policy frequently turns into a debate over macroeconomic history.

Yet history does not settle the debate over stabilization policy. Disagreements over history arise because it is not easy to identify the sources of economic fluctuations. The historical record often permits more than one interpretation.

The Great Depression is a case in point. Economists’ views on macroeconomic policy are often related to their views on the cause of the Depression. Some economists believe that a large contractionary shock to private spending caused the Depression. They assert that policymakers should have responded by using the tools of monetary and fiscal policy to stimulate aggregate demand. Other economists believe that the large fall in the money supply caused the Depression. They assert that the Depression would have been avoided if the Fed had been pursuing a passive monetary policy of increasing the money supply at a steady rate. Hence, depending on one’s beliefs about its cause, the Great Depression can be viewed either as an example of why active monetary and fiscal policy is necessary or as an example of why it is dangerous.

CASE STUDY

Is the Stabilization of the Economy a Figment of the Data?

Keynes wrote *The General Theory* in the 1930s, and in the wake of the Keynesian revolution, governments around the world began to view economic stabilization as a primary responsibility. Some economists believe that the development of Keynesian theory has had a profound influence on the behavior of the economy. Comparing data from before World War I and after World War II, they find that real GDP and unemployment have become much more stable. This, some Keynesians claim, is the best argument for active stabilization policy: it has worked.

In a series of provocative and influential papers, economist Christina Romer has challenged this assessment of the historical record. She argues that the measured reduction in volatility reflects not an improvement in economic policy and performance but rather an improvement in the economic data. The older data are much less accurate than the newer data. Romer claims that the higher volatility of unemployment and real GDP reported for the period before World War I is largely a figment of the data.

Romer uses various techniques to make her case. One is to construct more accurate data for the earlier period. This task is difficult because data sources are not readily available. A second way is to construct less accurate data for the recent period—that is, data that are comparable to the older data and thus suffer from the same imperfections. After constructing new “bad” data, Romer finds that the recent period appears almost as volatile as the early period, suggesting that the volatility of the early period may be largely an artifact of how the data were assembled.
Romer’s work is part of the continuing debate over whether macroeconomic policy has improved the performance of the economy. Although her work remains controversial, most economists now believe that the economy in the immediate aftermath of the Keynesian revolution was only slightly more stable than it had been before.3

**CASE STUDY**

**How Does Policy Uncertainty Affect the Economy?**

When monetary and fiscal policymakers actively try to control the economy, the future course of economic policy is often uncertain. Policymakers do not always make their intentions clear. Moreover, because the policy outcome can be the result of a divisive, contentious, and unpredictable political process, the public has every reason to be unsure about what policy decisions will end up being made.

In recent research, economists Scott Baker, Nicholas Bloom, and Steve Davis studied the effects of policy uncertainty. Baker, Bloom, and Davis began by constructing an index that measures how the amount of policy uncertainty changes over time. Their index has three components.

The first component is derived from reading articles in newspapers. Starting in January 1985, they searched ten major papers for terms related to economic and policy uncertainty. In particular, they searched for articles containing the term “uncertainty” or “uncertain,” the term “economic” or “economy,” and at least one of the following terms: “congress,” “legislation,” “white house,” “regulation,” “federal reserve,” or “deficit.” The more articles there were that included terms in all three categories, the higher the index of policy uncertainty.

The second component of the index is based on the number of temporary provisions in the federal tax code. Baker, Bloom, and Davis reasoned that “temporary tax measures are a source of uncertainty for businesses and households because Congress often extends them at the last minute, undermining stability in and certainty about the tax code.” The more temporary tax provisions there are, and the larger the dollar magnitudes involved in the provisions, the higher the index of policy uncertainty.

The third component of the index is based on the amount of disagreement among private forecasters about several key variables related to macroeconomic policy. Baker, Bloom, and Davis assumed that the more private forecasters disagree about the future price level and future levels of government spending, the more uncertainty there is about monetary and fiscal policy. That is, the greater the dispersion in these private forecasts, the higher the level of the policy uncertainty index.

Figure 18–2 shows the index derived from these three components. The index spikes upward, indicating an increase in policy uncertainty, when there is a significant foreign policy event (such as war or terrorist attack), when there is an economic crisis (such as the Black Monday stock market crash or the bankruptcy

---

of the large investment bank Lehman Brothers), or when there is a major political event (such as the election of a new president).

With this index in hand, Baker, Bloom, and Davis then investigated how policy uncertainty correlates with macroeconomic performance. They found that higher uncertainty about economic policy depresses the economy. In particular, when economic policy uncertainty rises, investment, production, and employment are likely to decline over the next year (relative to their normal growth).

One possible explanation for this effect is that uncertainty may depress the aggregate demand for goods and services. When policy uncertainty increases, households and firms may put off some large purchases until the uncertainty is resolved. For example, if a firm is considering building a new factory, and the profitability of the investment depends on what policy is pursued, the firm may decide to wait until a policy decision is made. Such a delay is rational for the firm, but it contributes to a decline in aggregate demand, which reduces the economy’s output and raises unemployment.

To be sure, some policy uncertainty is inevitable. But it is good for policymakers to keep in mind that the amount of uncertainty is, to some degree, under their control and that heightened uncertainty appears to have adverse macroeconomic effects.4

---

A second topic debated among economists is whether economic policy should be conducted by rule or by discretion. Policy is conducted by rule if policymakers announce in advance how policy will respond to various situations and commit themselves to following through on this announcement. Policy is conducted by discretion if policymakers are free to size up events as they occur and choose whatever policy they consider appropriate at the time.

The debate over rules versus discretion is distinct from the debate over passive versus active policy. Policy can be conducted by rule and yet be either passive or active. For example, a passive policy rule might specify steady growth in the money supply of 3 percent per year. An active policy rule might specify that

\[
\text{Money Growth} = 3\% + (\text{Unemployment Rate} - 6\%).
\]

Under this rule, the money supply grows at 3 percent if the unemployment rate is 6 percent, but for every percentage point by which the unemployment rate exceeds 6 percent, money growth increases by an extra percentage point. This rule tries to stabilize the economy by raising money growth when the economy is in a recession.

We begin this section by discussing why policy might be improved by a commitment to a policy rule. We then examine several possible policy rules.

Distrust of Policymakers and the Political Process

Some economists believe that economic policy is too important to be left to the discretion of policymakers. Although this view is more political than economic, evaluating it is central to how we judge the role of economic policy. If policymakers are incompetent or opportunistic, then we may not want to give them the discretion to use the powerful tools of monetary and fiscal policy.

Incompetence in economic policy arises for several reasons. Some economists view the political process as erratic, perhaps because it reflects the shifting power of special-interest groups. In addition, macroeconomics is complicated, and politicians often do not have sufficient knowledge of it to make informed judgments. This ignorance allows charlatans to propose incorrect but superficially appealing solutions to complex problems. The political process often cannot weed out the advice of charlatans from that of competent economists.

Opportunism in economic policy arises when the objectives of policymakers conflict with the well-being of the public. Some economists fear that politicians use macroeconomic policy to further their own electoral ends. If citizens vote on the basis of economic conditions prevailing at the time of the election, then politicians have an incentive to pursue policies that will make the economy look good during election years. A president might cause a recession soon after coming into office to lower inflation and then stimulate the economy as the next election approaches to lower unemployment; this would ensure that both
inflation and unemployment are low on election day. Manipulation of the economy for electoral gain, called the political business cycle, has been the subject of extensive research by economists and political scientists.\(^5\)

Distrust of the political process leads some economists to advocate placing economic policy outside the realm of politics. Some have proposed constitutional amendments, such as a balanced-budget amendment, that would tie the hands of legislators and insulate the economy from both incompetence and opportunism. We discuss some potential problems with a balanced-budget amendment in the next chapter.

### The Time Inconsistency of Discretionary Policy

If we assume that we can trust our policymakers, discretion at first glance appears superior to a fixed policy rule. Discretionary policy is, by its nature, flexible. As long as policymakers are intelligent and benevolent, there might appear to be little reason to deny them flexibility in responding to changing conditions.

Yet a case for rules over discretion arises from the problem of time inconsistency of policy. In some situations policymakers may want to announce in advance the policy they will follow to influence the expectations of private decisionmakers. But later, after the private decisionmakers have acted on the basis of their expectations, these policymakers may be tempted to renege on their announcement. Understanding that policymakers may be inconsistent over time, private decisionmakers are led to distrust policy announcements. In this situation, to make their announcements credible, policymakers may want to make a commitment to a fixed policy rule.

Time inconsistency is illustrated most simply with a political rather than an economic example—specifically, public policy about negotiating with terrorists over the release of hostages. The announced policy of many nations is that they will not negotiate over hostages. Such an announcement is intended to deter terrorists: if there is nothing to be gained from kidnapping hostages, rational terrorists won’t kidnap any. In other words, the purpose of the announcement is to influence the expectations of terrorists and thereby their behavior.

But, in fact, unless the policymakers are credibly committed to the policy, the announcement has little effect. Terrorists know that once hostages are taken, policymakers face an overwhelming temptation to make some concession to obtain the hostages’ release. The only way to deter rational terrorists is to take away the discretion of policymakers and commit them to a rule of never negotiating. If policymakers were truly unable to make concessions, the incentive for terrorists to take hostages would be largely eliminated.

The same problem arises less dramatically in the conduct of monetary policy. Consider the dilemma of a Federal Reserve that cares about both inflation and unemployment. According to the Phillips curve, the tradeoff between inflation

---

and unemployment depends on expected inflation. The Fed would prefer everyone to expect low inflation so that it will face a favorable tradeoff. To reduce expected inflation, the Fed might announce that low inflation is the paramount goal of monetary policy.

But an announcement of a policy of low inflation is by itself not credible. Once households and firms have formed their expectations of inflation and set wages and prices accordingly, the Fed has an incentive to renege on its announcement and implement expansionary monetary policy to reduce unemployment. People understand the Fed’s incentive to renege and therefore do not believe the announcement in the first place. Just as a president facing a hostage crisis is sorely tempted to negotiate their release, a Federal Reserve with discretion is sorely tempted to inflate in order to reduce unemployment. And just as terrorists discount announced policies of never negotiating, households and firms discount announced policies of low inflation.

The surprising outcome of this analysis is that policymakers can sometimes better achieve their goals by having their discretion taken away from them. In the case of rational terrorists, fewer hostages will be taken and killed if policymakers are committed to following the seemingly harsh rule of refusing to negotiate for hostages’ freedom. In the case of monetary policy, there will be lower inflation without higher unemployment if the Fed is committed to a policy of zero inflation. (This conclusion about monetary policy is modeled more explicitly in the appendix to this chapter.)

The time inconsistency of policy arises in many other contexts. Here are some examples:

- To encourage investment, the government announces that it will not tax income from capital. But after factories have been built, the government is tempted to renege on its promise to raise more tax revenue from them.

- To encourage research, the government announces that it will give a temporary monopoly to companies that discover new drugs. But after a drug has been discovered, the government is tempted to revoke the patent or to regulate the price to make the drug more affordable.

- To encourage good behavior, a parent announces that he will punish a child whenever the child breaks a rule. But after the child has misbehaved, the parent is tempted to forgive the transgression because punishment is unpleasant for the parent as well as for the child.

- To encourage you to work hard, your professor announces that this course will end with an exam. But after you have studied and learned all the material, the professor is tempted to cancel the exam so that he won’t have to grade it.

In each case, rational agents understand the incentive for the policymaker to renege, and this expectation affects their behavior. And in each case, the solution is to take away the policymaker’s discretion with a credible commitment to a fixed policy rule.
Rules for Monetary Policy

Even if we are convinced that policy rules are superior to discretion, the debate over macroeconomic policy is not over. If the Fed were to commit to a rule for monetary policy, what rule should it choose? Let’s briefly discuss three policy rules that various economists advocate.

Some economists, called monetarists, advocate that the Fed keep the money supply growing at a steady rate. The quotation at the beginning of this chapter from Milton Friedman—the most famous monetarist—exemplifies this view of monetary policy. Monetarists believe that fluctuations in the money supply are responsible for most large fluctuations in the economy. They argue that slow and steady growth in the money supply would yield stable output, employment, and prices.
A monetarist policy rule might have prevented many of the economic fluctuations we have experienced historically, but most economists believe that it is not the best possible policy rule. Steady growth in the money supply stabilizes aggregate demand only if the velocity of money is stable. But sometimes the economy experiences shocks, such as shifts in money demand, that cause velocity to be unstable. Most economists believe that a policy rule needs to allow the money supply to adjust to various shocks to the economy.

A second policy rule that economists widely advocate is nominal GDP targeting. Under this rule, the Fed announces a planned path for nominal GDP. If nominal GDP rises above the target, the Fed reduces money growth to dampen aggregate demand. If it falls below the target, the Fed raises money growth to stimulate aggregate demand. Because a nominal GDP target allows monetary policy to adjust to changes in the velocity of money, most economists believe it would lead to greater stability in output and prices than a monetarist policy rule.

A third policy rule that is often advocated is inflation targeting. Under this rule, the Fed would announce a target for the inflation rate (usually a low one) and then adjust the money supply when the actual inflation rate deviates from the target. Like nominal GDP targeting, inflation targeting insulates the economy from changes in the velocity of money. In addition, an inflation target has the political advantage of being easy to explain to the public.

Notice that all these rules are expressed in terms of some nominal variable—the money supply, nominal GDP, or the price level. One can also imagine policy rules expressed in terms of real variables. For example, the Fed might try to target the unemployment rate at 5 percent. The problem with such a rule is that no one knows exactly what the natural rate of unemployment is. If the Fed chose a target for the unemployment rate below the natural rate, the result would be accelerating inflation. Conversely, if the Fed chose a target for the unemployment rate above the natural rate, the result would be accelerating deflation. For this reason, economists rarely advocate rules for monetary policy expressed solely in terms of real variables, even though real variables such as unemployment and real GDP are the best measures of economic performance.

**CASE STUDY**

**Inflation Targeting: Rule or Constrained Discretion?**

Beginning in the late 1980s, many of the world’s central banks—including those of Australia, Canada, Finland, Israel, New Zealand, Sweden, and the United Kingdom—started to adopt some form of inflation targeting. Sometimes inflation targeting takes the form of a central bank announcing its policy intentions. At other times it takes the form of a national law that spells out the goals of monetary policy. For example, the Reserve Bank of New Zealand Act of 1989 told the central bank “to formulate and implement monetary policy directed to the economic objective of achieving and maintaining stability in the general level of prices.” The act conspicuously omitted any mention of any other competing objective, such as stability in output, employment, interest rates, or exchange rates.
Should we interpret inflation targeting as a type of precommitment to a policy rule? Not completely. In all the countries that have adopted inflation targeting, central banks are left with a fair amount of discretion. Inflation targets are usually set as a range—an inflation rate of 1 to 3 percent, for instance—rather than a particular number. Thus, the central bank can choose where in the range it wants to be: it can stimulate the economy and be near the top of the range or dampen the economy and be near the bottom. In addition, the central bank is sometimes allowed to adjust its target for inflation, at least temporarily, if some exogenous event (such as an easily identified supply shock) pushes inflation outside of the range that was previously announced.

In light of this flexibility, what is the purpose of inflation targeting? Although inflation targeting leaves the central bank with some discretion, the policy does constrain how this discretion is used. When a central bank is told simply to “do the right thing,” it is hard to hold the central bank accountable because people can argue forever about what the right thing is in any specific circumstance. By contrast, when a central bank has announced a specific inflation target, or even a target range, the public can more easily judge whether the central bank is meeting its objectives. Thus, although inflation targeting does not tie the hands of the central bank, it does increase the transparency of monetary policy and, by doing so, makes central bankers more accountable for their actions.6

The Federal Reserve was slow to adopt a policy of inflation targeting, but in 2012 it set for itself an inflation target of 2 percent. On its Web site, the Fed offers the following explanation:

The Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) judges that inflation at the rate of 2 percent (as measured by the annual change in the price index for personal consumption expenditures, or PCE) is most consistent over the longer run with the Federal Reserve’s mandate for price stability and maximum employment. Over time, a higher inflation rate would reduce the public’s ability to make accurate longer-term economic and financial decisions. On the other hand, a lower inflation rate would be associated with an elevated probability of falling into deflation, which means prices and perhaps wages, on average, are falling—a phenomenon associated with very weak economic conditions. Having at least a small level of inflation makes it less likely that the economy will experience harmful deflation if economic conditions weaken. The FOMC implements monetary policy to help maintain an inflation rate of 2 percent over the medium term."
from such political influence? In other words, assuming that monetary policy is made by discretion rather than by rule, who should exercise that discretion?

Countries vary greatly in how they choose to answer this question. In some countries, the central bank is a branch of the government; in others, the central bank is largely independent. In the United States, Fed governors are appointed by the president for 14-year terms, and they cannot be recalled if the president is unhappy with their decisions. This institutional structure gives the Fed a degree of independence similar to that of the U.S. Supreme Court.

Many researchers have investigated the effects of constitutional design on monetary policy. They have examined the laws of different countries to construct an index of central-bank independence. This index is based on various characteristics, such as the length of bankers’ terms, the role of government officials on the bank board, and the frequency of contact between the government and the central bank. The researchers then examined the correlation between central-bank independence and macroeconomic performance.

The results of these studies are striking: more independent central banks are strongly associated with lower and more stable inflation. Figure 18-3 shows a scatterplot of central-bank independence and average inflation for the period 1955 to 1988. Countries that had an independent central bank, such as Germany, Switzerland, and the United States, tended to have low average inflation. Countries that had central banks with less independence, such as New Zealand and Spain, tended to have higher average inflation.

**FIGURE 18-3**

Inflation and Central-Bank Independence This scatterplot presents the international experience with central-bank independence. The evidence shows that more independent central banks tend to produce lower rates of inflation.

Researchers have also found that there is no relationship between central-bank independence and real economic activity. In particular, central-bank independence is not correlated with average unemployment, the volatility of unemployment, the average growth of real GDP, or the volatility of real GDP. Central-bank independence appears to offer countries a free lunch: it has the benefit of lower inflation without any apparent cost. This finding has led some countries, such as New Zealand, to rewrite their laws to give their central banks greater independence.\(^7\)

18-3 Conclusion: Making Policy in an Uncertain World

In this chapter we have examined whether policy should take an active or passive role in responding to economic fluctuations and whether policy should be conducted by rule or by discretion. There are many arguments on both sides of these questions. Perhaps the only clear conclusion is that there is no simple and compelling case for any particular view of macroeconomic policy. In the end, you must weigh the various arguments, both economic and political, and decide for yourself what kind of role the government should play in trying to stabilize the economy.

For better or worse, economists play a key role in the formulation of economic policy. Because the economy is complex, this role is often difficult. Yet it is also inevitable. Economists cannot sit back and wait until our knowledge of the economy has been perfected before giving advice. In the meantime, someone must advise economic policymakers. That job, difficult as it sometimes is, falls to economists.

The role of economists in the policymaking process goes beyond giving advice to policymakers. Even economists cloistered in academia influence policy indirectly through their research and writing. In the conclusion of *The General Theory*, John Maynard Keynes wrote:

> [T]he ideas of economists and political philosophers, both when they are right and when they are wrong, are more powerful than is commonly understood. Indeed, the world is ruled by little else. Practical men, who believe themselves to be quite exempt from intellectual influences, are usually the slaves of some defunct economist. Madmen in authority, who hear voices in the air, are distilling their frenzy from some academic scribbler of a few years back.

This is as true today as it was when Keynes wrote it in 1936—except now that academic scribbler is often Keynes himself.

Summary

1. Advocates of active policy view the economy as subject to frequent shocks that will lead to unnecessary fluctuations in output and employment unless monetary or fiscal policy responds. Many believe that economic policy has been successful in stabilizing the economy.

2. Advocates of passive policy argue that because monetary and fiscal policies work with long and variable lags, attempts to stabilize the economy are likely to end up being destabilizing. In addition, they believe that our present understanding of the economy is too limited to be useful in formulating successful stabilization policy and that inept policy is a frequent source of economic fluctuations.

3. Advocates of discretionary policy argue that discretion gives more flexibility to policymakers in responding to various unforeseen situations.

4. Advocates of policy rules argue that the political process cannot be trusted. They believe that politicians make frequent mistakes in conducting economic policy and sometimes use economic policy for their own political ends. In addition, advocates of policy rules argue that a commitment to a fixed policy rule is necessary to solve the problem of time inconsistency.

KEY CONCEPTS

Inside lag  Lucas critique  Monetarists
Outside lag  Political business cycle  Inflation targeting
Automatic stabilizers  Time inconsistency

QUESTIONS FOR REVIEW

1. What are the inside lag and the outside lag? Which has the longer inside lag—monetary or fiscal policy? Which has the longer outside lag? Why?

2. Why would more accurate economic forecasting make it easier for policymakers to stabilize the economy? Describe two ways economists try to forecast developments in the economy.

3. Describe the Lucas critique.

4. How does a person’s interpretation of macroeconomic history affect his view of macroeconomic policy?

5. What is meant by the “time inconsistency” of economic policy? Why might policymakers be tempted to renege on an announcement they made earlier? In this situation, what is the advantage of a policy rule?

6. List three policy rules that the Fed might follow. Which of these would you advocate? Why?
1. Suppose that the tradeoff between unemployment and inflation is determined by the Phillips curve:

\[ u = u^* - \alpha(\pi - E\pi), \]

where \( u \) denotes the unemployment rate, \( u^* \) the natural rate, \( \pi \) the rate of inflation, and \( E\pi \) the expected rate of inflation. In addition, suppose that the Left Party always follows a policy of high money growth and the Right Party always follows a policy of low money growth. What “political business cycle” pattern of inflation and unemployment would you predict under the following conditions?

a. Every four years, one of the parties takes control based on a random flip of a coin. (Hint: What will expected inflation be prior to the election?)

b. The two parties take turns.

c. Do your answers above support the conclusion that monetary policy should be set by an independent central bank?

2. When cities pass laws limiting the rent landlords can charge on apartments, the laws usually apply to existing buildings and exempt any buildings not yet built. Advocates of rent control argue that this exemption ensures that rent control does not discourage the construction of new housing. Evaluate this argument in light of the time-inconsistency problem.

3. A central bank has decided to adopt inflation targeting and is now debating whether to target 5 percent inflation or zero inflation. The economy is described by the following Phillips curve:

\[ u = 5 - 0.5(\pi - E\pi), \]

where \( u \) and \( \pi \) are the unemployment rate and inflation rate measured in percentage points.

The social cost of unemployment and inflation is described by the following loss function:

\[ L = u + 0.05\pi^2. \]

The central bank would like this loss to be as small as possible.

a. If the central bank commits to targeting 5 percent inflation, what is expected inflation? If the central bank follows through, what is the unemployment rate? What is the loss from inflation and unemployment?

b. If the central bank commits to targeting zero inflation, what is expected inflation? If the central bank follows through, what is the unemployment rate? What is the loss from inflation and unemployment?

c. Based on your answers to parts (a) and (b), which inflation target would you recommend? Why?

d. Suppose the central bank chooses to target zero inflation, and expected inflation is zero. Suddenly, however, the central bank surprises people with 5 percent inflation. What is unemployment in this period of unexpected inflation? What is the loss from inflation and unemployment?

e. What problem does your answer to part (d) illustrate?

4. After every policy meeting, the Federal Reserve issues a statement (sometimes called the press release), which you can find on the Fed’s Web site (http://www.federalreserve.gov/monetarypolicy/fomccalendars.htm). Read the most recent statement. What does it say? What is the Fed doing? Why? What do you think about the Fed’s recent policy decisions?

To access online learning resources, visit LaunchPad for Macroeconomics, 9e at www.macmillanhighered.com/launchpad/mankiw9e