



Department of Economics Discussion Paper Series

Battle of the markups: conflict inflation and the aspirational channel of monetary policy transmission

Frederick van der Ploeg and Tim Willems

Number 1074
June, 2024

Battle of the markups: conflict inflation and the aspirational channel of monetary policy transmission^{*}

Frederick VAN DER PLOEG and Tim WILLEMS[†]

June 2024

Abstract

Since the post-Covid rise in inflation has been accompanied by strong wage growth, the distributional conflict between wage- and price-setters (both wishing to attain a certain markup) has regained prominence. We examine how a central bank should resolve a “battle of the markups” when aspired markups are cyclically sensitive, highlighting a new “aspirational channel” of monetary transmission. We establish conditions under which an inflationary situation characterized by inconsistent aspirations requires a reduction in economic activity, to eliminate worker-firm disagreement over the appropriate level of the real wage. We find that countercyclical markups and/or a flat Phillips curve call for more dovish monetary policy. Estimating price markup cyclicalities across 61 countries, we find evidence for countercyclicalities in most of them.

JEL-classification: E31, E32, E52, E58.

Key words: inflation, wage-price dynamics, markups, monetary policy transmission, Taylor principle, determinacy.

^{*}We thank Charlie Bean, Mike Devereux, Sarah Duffy, Marc Hinterschweiger, Robert Inklaar, Joel Kariel, Matija Lozej, Huw Pill, Ricardo Reis, Diego Rodrigues, Anthony Savagar, David Vines, Boromeus Wanengkirtyo, Iván Werning, Sweder van Wijnbergen, Francesco Zanetti and audiences at the Bank of England, the CEPR Paris Symposium, De Nederlandsche Bank, and the University of Kent for useful comments. The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors, and not necessarily those of the Bank of England or its committees.

[†]Van der Ploeg: University of Oxford, University of Amsterdam, and CEPR (rick.vanderploeg@economics.ox.ac.uk); Willems: Bank of England and Centre for Macroeconomics (tim.willems@bankofengland.co.uk).

1 Introduction

We need to ensure that firms absorb rising labour costs in margins. If monetary policy is sufficiently restrictive, the economy can achieve disinflation overall while real wages recover some of their losses. But this hinges on our policy dampening demand for some time so that firms cannot continue to display the pricing behaviour we have recently seen.

– Christine Lagarde (2023)

As pointed out in seminal works by Rowthorn (1977), Blanchard (1986), and Layard and Nickell (1986), inflation can be seen as resulting from a type of distributional conflict – a situation in which the sum of the competing claims, or “aspirations”, by various groups (e.g., workers and firms) is inconsistent with the total size of the economy. Lorenzoni and Werning (2023ab) have recently resuscitated this wage-price-centric view by pointing out that disagreement is also driving inflation in a standard new-Keynesian model, while Beaudry, Carter, and Lahiri (2022) analyze the ability of central banks to “look through” supply shocks in a model featuring the possibility of a wage-price spiral.

Following the recent bout of inflation, which has led to renewed focus on wage-price dynamics, we build on this literature. Our novel contribution is to examine how a central bank should resolve a “battle of the markups” when aspired markups are cyclically sensitive. We show that central banks ought to create cyclical conditions to moderate the various claims as necessary, ensuring consistency with the total size of the economy. This leads to an “aspirational channel” of monetary policy transmission, which brings about changes in the relative power of workers versus firms. But the direction in which central banks should respond is shown to depend on the cyclicity of wage- and price markups (where the relevant concept is the “frictionless” markup that would be desired by firms and workers if prices and wages were fully flexible). If flexible price/wage markups are procyclical, a monetary contraction lowers inflation via the resulting slowdown reducing aspirations held by workers and/or firms (getting them to settle for a lower markup). Here, economic slack (think: unemployment, or the output gap) fulfills a taming role, moderating unrealistic aspirations held by firms or workers. But if markups are countercyclical (a case for which we end up finding significant empirical support), a central bank responding aggressively to inflation may create indeterminacy – particularly if the Phillips curve is rather flat. Monetary policy may then need to take a more accommodating stance towards inflation to produce a determinate equilibrium, or place a bigger weight on the output gap – i.e., conduct monetary policy “more dovishly”. Optimal policy considerations are shown to carry similar implications.

The notion that the optimal flexible-price markup varies over the business cycle is widespread and there are various reasons for why this may result. An economic slowdown could make firms afraid of having to carry large inventories of unsold products, or suffer from capacity under-utilisation. This would imply that price markups aspired by firms are procyclical. While such procyclicality is supported by some models,¹ others imply that firms’ desired markups are countercyclical.² Throughout this paper, we remain agnostic on the precise channel(s) giving rise to the cyclicalities in desired markups. Instead, we take a reduced-form approach – focusing squarely on the impact of cyclicalities as such.

Empirical evidence on the cyclicalities of markups also abounds. On price markups, the seminal work by Rotemberg and Woodford (1999) has since been complemented by various studies, including: Bils and Kahn (2000) and Kryvtsov and Midrigan (2013), arguing that inventory behavior points to price markups being countercyclical; Gilchrist et al. (2017), who find that financially-constrained firms increased their markups in the Great Recession; and Bils, Klenow, and Malin’s (2018), whose finding of a persistent, countercyclical price markup also suggests that firms actively raise markups in downturns. Other studies support price markup *procyclicality*, including Haskel, Martin, and Small (1995, on UK data), Nekarda and Ramey (2020, who show that the cyclicalities may vary in response to different shocks, documenting procyclicality following demand shocks) and Afrouzi and Caloi (2023, who find that accounting for output dynamics is important and favors procyclicality). Hong (2019) and Burstein, Carvalho, and Grassi (2020) show how the various estimates can be reconciled via a “bottom-up” approach (distinguishing between various levels of aggregation, with markups being more procyclical for larger firms). When it comes to the cyclicalities of flexible-wage markups, most can be learned from analyzing wages of newly-hired workers (ideally out of unemployment), as those are less affected by wage rigidities. Studies report these “marginal” wages to be procyclical – in line with the standard logic that workers have a worse bargaining position in recessions; see Haefke, Sonntag, and Van Rens (2013, for the U.S.), Lydon and Lozej (2018, for Ireland), and Albagli et al. (2022, for Chile).³

¹See, e.g., Qiu and Ríos-Rull (2022, who consider a model with search frictions) or Harrod (1936, who believed markups to be procyclical because of lower price sensitivity of consumers during booms).

²Examples include: implicit collusion of oligopolists (Rotemberg and Woodford, 1992); the existence of customer markets (Phelps and Winter, 1970; Bils, 1989); cyclicalities in income dispersion (Edmond and Veldkamp, 2009); firm entry/exit (Portier, 1995; Jaimovich and Floetotto, 2008; Bilbiie, Ghironi, and Melitz, 2012); and cyclical variations in demand composition (Galí, 1994). The general idea of countercyclical markups can be traced back to Pigou (1927), Kalecki (1938), and Keynes (1939), who thought that monopoly power in goods markets went up in recessions.

³The finding of Gertler, Huckfeldt, and Trigari (2020), that wages of new hires from unemployment are no more cyclical than those of existing workers, contrasts with Haefke, Sonntag, and Van Rens (2013). But, importantly for our paper, Gertler et al. still report wages for existing workers to be procyclical (it

Following the significant rise in inflation that affected many countries post-2021, the role played by firms’ price markups (and associated wage-price dynamics) has taken center-stage: in popular discussions (where references to “greedflation” and “profiteering” abound), among policymakers (Lagarde, 2023; Pill, 2023), as well as in academic circles. Lorenzoni and Werning (2023b) develop an analytical framework to distinguish between “adjustment” and “conflict” inflation, noting that conflict should be viewed as the most proximate cause of inflation; a related paper by Lorenzoni and Werning (2023a) studies wage-price dynamics in a new-Keynesian setting. Bilbiie and Känzig (2023) analyze how the cyclicalities of profits affects shock propagation in a heterogeneous-agent setup. Arce, Hahn, and Koester (2023) suggest that about two-thirds of 2022 inflation in the Eurozone is driven by profit increases (compared to a pre-pandemic average of one-third), while Glover, Mustre-del-Río, and Von Ende-Becker (2023) find that markup growth likely contributed more than 50 percent to U.S. inflation in 2021 (though much of this seems to have happened in anticipation of future cost pressures). Weber and Wasner (2023) argue that interest rate hikes are not an appropriate policy response to (what they see as) “sellers’ inflation”. Our framework formalizes elements of this debate and establishes precise conditions under which interest rate hikes are an appropriate policy response (as well as those under which a more accommodating monetary policy is required).

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. First, Section 2 develops a stylized model which shows the role monetary policy can play when workers and firms disagree about the appropriate level of the real wage. It shows that if aspired markups of workers and firms respond with different intensity to changes in cyclical conditions, monetary policy can bring competing claimants back in line by using the extent of economic slack to moderate markup aspirations. Section 3 subsequently brings the core insight to a new-Keynesian environment and analyzes issues related to determinacy and optimal policy. Next, Section 4 estimates the degree of price markup cyclicalities across 61 countries, finding evidence in favor of countercyclical markups. Section 5 concludes.

2 Stylized model

In this section we build a stylized model to capture the “competing claims” notion of inflation. Section 2.1 starts by analyzing a static setup, to build core intuition (in particular with respect to the role played by cyclical conditions in moderating markup aspirations), after which Section 2.2 will add adjustment dynamics and a central bank. In Section 3

is just that they do not find greater procyclicality for new hires out of unemployment).

we will amend a new-Keynesian model with the features necessary to capture the essence of our simple setting, but the insights stemming from that framework are surprisingly similar (only more involved, which is why we see value in covering the simpler case first – also as it allows for an intuitive graphical analysis).

2.1 Static setup

Consider the following setup, inspired by Layard, Nickell, and Jackman (1991). Firms want to set their price as a “frictionless” aspired markup μ_p over the unit cost of labor and imported inputs to production (where the label “frictionless” indicates that this notion of markups abstracts from nominal rigidities; instead it is the markup firms would set if prices were fully flexible). Assuming that imported inputs account for a production cost share ζ_p , such a pricing strategy boils down to:

$$P^\# = e^{\mu_p} \left(\frac{WN}{Y} \right)^{1-\zeta_p} P_f^{\zeta_p},$$

where $P^\#$ denotes the price that is aspired by firms, W represents the nominal wage rate, N is labor input, P_f is the price of imported goods (in local currency)⁴; domestic output is denoted by Y . Firms thus aspire to be fully compensated for increases in production costs, either stemming from domestic or international pressures.

Workers want to set their real consumption wage (the nominal wage divided by the consumer price level, accounting for imports) by enjoying a frictionless aspired markup μ_w over the marginal product of labor. So they aspire to be compensated for increases in consumer prices (either stemming from domestic or international pressures), as well as wishing to capture gains from increased labor productivity Y/N :

$$W^\# = e^{\mu_w} \left(\frac{Y}{N} \right) P^{1-\zeta_w} P_f^{\zeta_w},$$

where $P^{1-\zeta_w} P_f^{\zeta_w}$ is the price of the consumption basket: it consists of the domestic price level P and the price of imported goods P_f , which carries a share ζ_w in the basket. Letting $S \equiv P_f/P$ denote the terms-of-trade, we obtain the following in logs (using lower-case letters to represent natural logarithms of variables, and defining $\gamma \equiv \ln(Y/N)$):

⁴To keep the analysis simple, we abstract from movements in the nominal exchange rate $\mathcal{E}$, effectively thus considering a case of local currency pricing or a pegged exchange rate regime ($\mathcal{E} = 1$).

$$p^\# = w + \frac{\mu_p + \zeta_p s}{1 - \zeta_p} - \gamma, \quad (1)$$

$$w^\# = p + \zeta_w s + \mu_w + \gamma. \quad (2)$$

Depending on the aspiration levels for firms (μ_p) and workers (μ_w), and the terms-of-trade (s), aspired markups are unlikely to be compatible with the size of the economy. This is only the case if aspirations by workers and firms are consistent with the “space” created by the terms-of-trade, i.e., if

$$(1 - \zeta_p)\mu_w + \mu_p = -(\zeta_p + \zeta_w - \zeta_p\zeta_w)s.$$

If the competing claims exceed this space, there is an unresolved “battle of the markups”.

Layard and Nickell (1986) argue that the presence of unemployment u has an impact on aspirations held by firms and workers, giving u the ability to function like a clearing mechanism through which inconsistent aspirations can be resolved. In particular, they argue that the markup desired by workers is procyclical and declines in unemployment, as the bargaining power of workers (or their representing unions) is lower when u is higher. Unemployment here acts like a moderation device, lowering workers’ markup aspirations. This can be captured, in a reduced-form way, by specifying that the frictionless wage markup consists of a structural component (“ $\bar{\mu}_w$ ”) and a cyclically-sensitive one (“ $-k_w u$ ”):

$$\mu_w = \bar{\mu}_w - k_w u. \quad (3)$$

The slope k_w captures the cyclicalities in the frictionless wage markup desired by workers. Setting $k_w > 0$ implies that greater unemployment reduces the wage markup aspired by workers (or unions on their behalf), leading to a procyclical frictionless wage markup.⁵

Similarly, one can also allow for unemployment to affect the markup desired by firms:

$$\mu_p = \bar{\mu}_p - k_p u. \quad (4)$$

⁵This may seem at odds with empirical studies reporting the wage markup to be countercyclical (Galí, Gertler, and López-Salido (2007); Hall (2009); Karabarbounis (2014)), but they are looking at wage outcomes *observed in equilibrium*. Those are also affected by aspirations of firms, who strive for a higher value of P/W (as opposed to workers’ objectives being increasing in W/P). Moreover, a countercyclical wage markup in the data is not at odds with $k_w > 0$ because of wage stickiness (remember that k_w only governs the “frictionless” cyclicalities in a counterfactual world where wages are perfectly flexible). Consequently, looking at the cyclicalities of wages for *newly-hired workers* is most informative in this context (as they are less affected by wage rigidities), and those are widely reported to be procyclical (Haefke, Sonntag, and Van Rens, 2013; Lydon and Lozej, 2018; Albagli et al., 2022).

As discussed in the Introduction, the cyclicality of price markups aspired by firms is debated – both theoretically and empirically. This suggests that price markups may be less cyclically-sensitive than wage markups, making us most comfortable to proceed assuming that $k_w > |k_p| > 0$, without assuming anything about the sign of k_p or the exact theoretical underpinning of such cyclicality. Instead, we stick with a reduced-form approach to focus purely on the general implications of aspired markups being cyclically sensitive.

By substituting (3) and (4) into (1) and (2), and allowing unemployment to resolve the “battle of the markups”, we obtain levels for the real wage $(w - p)^\diamond$ and unemployment $u^\diamond$ at which the various aspirations have become compatible and conflict is resolved:

$$(w - p)^\diamond = \frac{k_p \bar{\mu}_w - k_w \bar{\mu}_p - (k_w \zeta_p - k_p \zeta_w)s}{k_p + k_w(1 - \zeta_p)} + \gamma, \quad (5)$$

$$u^\diamond = \frac{\bar{\mu}_p + (1 - \zeta_p)\bar{\mu}_w + [\zeta_w(1 - \zeta_p) + \zeta_p]s}{k_p + k_w(1 - \zeta_p)}. \quad (6)$$

For the most standard case where $k_p + k_w(1 - \zeta_p) > 0$,⁶ we distill several insights:

1. First considering the case where $\zeta_p = 0$, meaning that the terms-of-trade has no direct effect on firms, (5) and (6) show that unemployment will only be able to resolve a situation of incompatible claims when it affects aspirations of firms and workers with different intensity (so that different levels of unemployment are associated with differences in relative market power of workers versus firms). That is: one needs $k_p + k_w \neq 0$, or one encounters a singularity in equations (5)-(6).⁷ Economically, having $k_p + k_w = 0$ implies that changes in unemployment bring about changes in aspired markups that exactly offset – meaning that fluctuations in u have no role to play in resolving distributional conflict.⁸ When $\zeta_p > 0$, wages account for a smaller share of production costs (and imported materials for more), meaning

⁶This condition holds when the wage markup aspired by workers μ_w is (a) important to price setters (the share of firms’ imports ζ_p not too large), (b) most cyclically sensitive ($|k_w| > |k_p|$) and (c) procyclical ($k_w > 0$, as suggested by bargaining logic). Building on the analysis in Section 2.2, Appendix A discusses dynamics when $k_p + (1 - \zeta_p)k_w < 0$, showing that this case features a somewhat odd form of negative pass-through (which is why we view $k_p + (1 - \zeta_p)k_w > 0$ as the most natural case).

⁷Note that it is fine to have $k_p = k_w$ (since firms and workers aspire to push the real wage in opposite directions); it is just a situation of equality with opposite sign that needs to be avoided.

⁸It is worth noting that unemployment comes about somewhat curiously in this simple setup: “it” somehow understands that it needs to clear the conflict – tilting the relative market power of workers and firms in a way to ensure compatibility between competing claims. In Section 2.2 we will move away from this notion by introducing a central bank that can affect the cycle – thereby altering markup aspirations of workers and firms – with an eye towards producing a determinate equilibrium.

that the parameter governing the cyclicalities of the wage markup (k_w) becomes less important.

2. An increase in the structural part of the wage markup aspired by workers ($\bar{\mu}_w \uparrow$) pushes up unemployment in order to resolve the “markup battle” – but less so the closer ζ_p is to 1, as the importance of wage costs to firms falls with ζ_p . The implications for the real wage depend on the sign of k_p , which is the cyclicalities of the markup aspired by firms. When $k_p > 0$ a higher aspired wage markup by workers increases their real wage, as the increase in unemployment lowers the price markup charged by firms. This creates room for workers to enjoy a higher real wage, in line with their elevated aspirations. But if $k_p < 0$ higher structural aspirations by workers end up backfiring: the resulting increase in unemployment raises the markup charged by firms (as this is now countercyclical), which requires the real wage to fall in order to re-establish consistency.
3. An increase in the structural part of the price markup aspired by firms ($\bar{\mu}_p \uparrow$) pushes up unemployment, while reducing the real wage (by lowering the wage markup, via a worsened bargaining position for labor in the standard case where $k_w > 0$).
4. A worse terms-of-trade ($s \uparrow$) pushes up unemployment. It shrinks the size of the pie that can be divided domestically (a greater share falls to foreigners, as importing a given quantity now requires more real resources). Absent a reduction in structural aspirations $\bar{\mu}_p$ or $\bar{\mu}_w$ or offsetting increases in productivity γ , that implies distributional conflict. To re-impose consistency between competing claims, u needs to rise. The effect on the real wage depends on the sign of $(k_w\zeta_p - k_p\zeta_w)$. Since this expression involves two interaction terms, the intuition is best understood when fixing each part in turn. First, fix $\zeta_p = \zeta_w = \zeta > 0$. Then, $k_w\zeta - k_p\zeta < 0$ implies that price markups are most exposed to the cycle (meaning that firms have to bear the brunt of the recession), and firms end up having to pay a higher real wage; the opposite applies if $k_w\zeta - k_p\zeta > 0$. Next, fix $k_p = k_w = k > 0$. Then, $k\zeta_p - k\zeta_w < 0$ implies that workers (who ultimately care about their ability to purchase consumption goods) see their real consumption wage fall after a terms-of-trade loss, since part of consumption is imported – now at a less favorable rate. This leads to a higher real wage W/P (where P is the *domestic* price level) as consumers partly pass on this loss to producers; the opposite applies if $k\zeta_p - k\zeta_w > 0$.

2.2 Dynamic extension

Next, let us enrich the static model of Section 2.1 with adjustment dynamics in the presence of price and wage rigidities (for example stemming from a Calvo (1983) friction or price adjustment costs of the Rotemberg (1982) type). In addition, we introduce a central bank which sets the interest rate – steering the economy with an eye towards preventing indeterminacy. This enables us to move away from the stylized setting of Section 2.1, where unemployment somehow takes on the “clearing” role of steering the relative markup aspirations of workers and firms in a way to ensure compatibility between the various competing claims (recall footnote 8). A priori, there is no strong reason as to why unemployment would take on this role. After all: unemployment has many other determinants, including search frictions (Pissarides, 2000) or preventing workers from shirking (Shapiro and Stiglitz, 1984), implying that it is not “free” to assume other roles. But (part of) the *raison d’être* of central banks lies in stabilizing inflation and the economy, so we now move to a setting in which a central bank conducts monetary policy taking note of the effects that changes in cyclical conditions have on aspired markups.

To simplify the analysis, we hold labor productivity constant at 1 (so that its natural log $\gamma = 0$) and take the terms-of-trade s to be exogenous. That leads to:

$$\dot{w}_t = \lambda_w [p_t + \zeta_w s + \mu_{w,t} - w_t], \quad (7)$$

$$\dot{p}_t = \lambda_p [w_t + \tilde{\zeta}_p s + \tilde{\mu}_{p,t} - p_t], \quad (8)$$

where variables carrying a tilde are defined as $\tilde{x} \equiv (1 - \zeta_p)^{-1}x$. These equations state that wages and prices will gradually move to their aspired levels, with the speed of adjustment being governed by $\lambda_w > 0$ and $\lambda_p > 0$, respectively.⁹ Combining (7) and (8) (and using time-variant versions of (3) and (4)) leads to an equation describing the evolution of the real wage $\omega_t \equiv w_t - p_t$:

$$\dot{\omega}_t = \lambda_w \bar{\mu}_w - \lambda_p \tilde{\mu}_p + \left[\lambda_w \zeta_w - \lambda_p \tilde{\zeta}_p \right] s - \left[\lambda_w k_w - \lambda_p \tilde{k}_p \right] u_t - [\lambda_w + \lambda_p] \omega_t. \quad (9)$$

It seems natural to take $\lambda_w k_w > \lambda_p \tilde{k}_p$, so that the real wage falls as unemployment rises.

⁹Note that equations (7) and (8) are only correct if workers and firms are myopic, as they do not take future aspiration levels into account (see Lorenzoni and Werning (2023ab) for the differential equations in the case where agents are forward looking). Section 3 will model forward-looking behavior along fully rational lines, but this turns out to be of minor importance to the point we want to highlight below – which is why we simplify along this dimension here.

Next, consider a standard Euler equation that arises under log-utility by households:

$$\dot{c}_t = R_t - \pi_t - \varrho, \quad (10)$$

where ϱ represents the constant rate of time preference, $\pi_t \equiv \dot{p}_t$ (the rate of inflation), and R_t the nominal interest rate. The latter is set by the central bank, with the aim of steering the economy in a way that ensures determinacy. We assume that the interest rate is set according to a simple Taylor-type rule responding to inflation and unemployment with reaction coefficients $\phi_\pi, \phi_u \geq 0$, respectively:

$$R_t = \phi_\pi \pi_t - \phi_u u_t. \quad (11)$$

The negative sign in (11), combined with $\phi_u \geq 0$, captures the notion that the central bank will set a lower interest rate when unemployment is higher. We define the Taylor principle in a narrow way, as the central bank responding more than one-for-one to inflation deviations from target, i.e., having $\phi_\pi > 1$.

In this case, combining our linear production technology $y_t = n_t$ with (10), (11) and goods-market clearing, yields the following for the evolution of unemployment $u_t \equiv 1 - n_t$:

$$\dot{u}_t = \varrho - (\phi_\pi - 1)\pi_t + \phi_u u_t. \quad (12)$$

Using equation (8) in (12), along with a time-variant version of (4), gives:

$$\dot{u}_t = \varrho - (\phi_\pi - 1)\lambda_p[\omega_t + \tilde{\zeta}_p s + \tilde{\mu}_p - \tilde{k}_p u_t] + \phi_u u_t. \quad (13)$$

Together, equations (9) and (13) describe a system of two equations in two unknowns (unemployment and the real wage), with its dynamics described by:

$$\begin{bmatrix} \dot{\omega}_t \\ \dot{u}_t \end{bmatrix} = \underbrace{\begin{bmatrix} -(\lambda_w + \lambda_p) & -(\lambda_w k_w - \lambda_p \tilde{k}_p) \\ -(\phi_\pi - 1)\lambda_p & (\phi_\pi - 1)\lambda_p \tilde{k}_p + \phi_u \end{bmatrix}}_J \begin{bmatrix} \omega_t - \omega^* \\ u_t - u^* \end{bmatrix}, \quad (14)$$

where the steady-state outcomes ω^* and u^* follow from setting (9) and (13) equal to zero.

2.2.1 Determinacy

In this setting, the central bank can affect cyclical conditions (here proxied by unemployment) which, in turn, has a bearing on markup aspirations of workers and firms (as governed by equations (3) and (4)). This affects the model's stability properties. To see

this, note that the determinant of the Jacobian matrix J in (14) is given by:

$$\det(J) = -\lambda_p \lambda_w (\tilde{k}_p + k_w)(\phi_\pi - 1) - (\lambda_w + \lambda_p) \phi_u, \quad (15)$$

which features the “aggregate” degree of markup cyclicality in the economy $(\tilde{k}_p + k_w)$.

Armed with (15) we can establish the following with regards to the Rational Expectations Equilibrium (REE):

Proposition 1. *If the central bank abides by the Taylor principle ($\phi_\pi > 1$) the REE is determinate iff*

$$\tilde{k}_p + k_w > -\frac{\phi_u(\lambda_w + \lambda_p)}{(\phi_\pi - 1)\lambda_p \lambda_w}. \quad (16)$$

Proof. Since the model consists of one predetermined variable, ω , and one jump variable, u , we need the matrix J to have one stable and one unstable eigenvalue to obtain saddle-path stability. Since the determinant of J is equal to the product of its two eigenvalues, this requires $\det(J) < 0$, which – in turn – requires (16) when $\phi_\pi > 1$. ■

Corollary 1. *If the central bank does not abide by the Taylor principle ($\phi_\pi < 1$) the REE is determinate iff*

$$\tilde{k}_p + k_w < -\frac{\phi_u(\lambda_w + \lambda_p)}{(\phi_\pi - 1)\lambda_p \lambda_w}.$$

Condition (16) is easiest to understand when considering a narrow Taylor rule that is solely focused on inflation (i.e., $\phi_u = 0$); (16) then simplifies to $\tilde{k}_p + k_w > 0$. This condition tells us that the Taylor principle only delivers determinacy when there is enough procyclicality in wage and price markups (which co-determine the evolution of the real wage $\omega \equiv w - p$). In that case, inflation resulting from “inconsistent aspirations” can only be resolved through an increase in unemployment when $\tilde{k}_p + k_w > 0$. Only in that case does greater unemployment tame aggregate aspirations (one can define those as $\mu_p + \mu_w$). This logic indeed seems to be on policymakers’ minds: Lagarde (2023) for example stated that the anti-inflationary success of ECB rate hikes hinges on “policy dampening demand for some time so that firms cannot continue to display the pricing behaviour we have recently seen”. In terms of our model, she thus takes the view that $\tilde{k}_p > 0$, leading to a transmission channel whereby a cyclical deterioration reduces firms’ markup aspirations and therewith inflation.

But if $\tilde{k}_p + k_w < 0$, for example because of strong countercyclicality in frictionless price markups, the Taylor principle is unable to resolve the “battle of the markups” and fails to deliver determinacy: in that case the dominant effect of higher rates is to raise the aspired price markup μ_p . In our simple model, this worsens the recession (unemployment rises by (13)) which increases firms’ markup aspirations *even more*. Here, responding “actively” to higher inflation (i.e., with $\phi_\pi > 1$) fails to resolve the inflation conflict (in contrast: it feeds inflation) and a passive approach is required (Corollary 1).

When the monetary policy rule becomes responsive to unemployment in a countercyclical way (i.e., with $\phi_u > 0$), abiding by the Taylor principle “ $\phi_\pi > 1$ ” becomes more compatible with determinacy – even if $\tilde{k}_p + k_w < 0$ (the case where markups are countercyclical on aggregate). The reason is that the central bank’s countercyclical response to unemployment puts a break on inflation driven by the countercyclicality in firm markups – making the conventional Taylor principle more compatible with a determinate equilibrium. As we will show in Section 3, similar logic applies in a new-Keynesian setup – only with an important role to be played by the slope of the Phillips curve.

2.2.2 Dynamics following a terms-of-trade shock

To better understand the forces at play, and given recent events (where many energy-importing countries experienced a negative terms-of-trade shock), we analyze the model’s dynamics following a permanent, unanticipated adverse terms-of-trade shock, pushing up s . The system (14) allows for an intuitive graphical exposition via the phase diagram in Figure 1a. The effects of $s \uparrow$ vary with the exposure to the shock of workers versus firms. Let us therefore consider two polar cases in turn. For brevity and ease of exposition, the main text focuses on the most standard case where $\phi_\pi > 1$, meaning that the $\dot{u} = 0$ locus is upward-sloping in ω . But we know (from Corollary 1) that our model also allows for cases where the $\dot{u} = 0$ locus is *downward*-sloping in ω (as long as its slope is smaller in absolute value than that of the $\dot{\omega} = 0$ locus). The dynamics for that case are shown and discussed in Appendix A (which also discusses how this case leads to “burden-concentration/multiplication”, in contrast to the burden-sharing described below for the case where the $\dot{u} = 0$ locus is positively sloped).

Case I: $\zeta_w > \zeta_p = 0$. Here, workers are more reliant on imports (“energy”) than firms, whose exposure we have normalized to zero for ease of exposition. Starting from the original equilibrium E , an adverse terms-of-trade shock leaves the $\dot{u} = 0$ locus untouched, but pushes up the $\dot{\omega} = 0$ locus since any given real wage W/P buys each worker less

in terms of consumption (which is partly imported, now at a higher price). The higher real wage gives rise to inflation, to which the central bank (aiming to keep prices stable through its interest rate rule (11)) responds by tightening. This increases unemployment, which first jumps to point A (located on the saddle path, SP) in Figure 1b. Along the transition path, both the real wage and unemployment keep rising until, ultimately, the inflation conflict is cleared. This gives rise to a new steady state at E' , featuring higher unemployment and a higher real wage; the latter reflects that there is positive pass-through of the terms-of-trade loss from workers to firms (who are not *directly* exposed to the shock under $\zeta_p = 0$); this process is similar to that of “tax shifting” in public finance. Still, because pass-through is incomplete, workers’ ability to buy consumption goods is lower in this new steady state – reflecting the worsened terms of trade, along with the fact that consumption is partly imported when $\zeta_w > 0$.

Case II: $\zeta_p > \zeta_w = 0$. Next consider the opposite scenario where firms are exposed to the energy shock (and workers are not). This causes an upward shift in the $\dot{u} = 0$ locus, but also moves the $\dot{\omega} = 0$ locus down – capturing that firms are more energy-reliant, meaning that they wish to pass part of the pain on to workers (who are not directly exposed to the energy shock, since $\zeta_w = 0$), by paying a lower real wage.

This reduces steady-state real wages ω , while increasing steady-state unemployment u (Figure 1c). The reason is as discussed in the final paragraph of Section 2.1: following the adverse development in the terms-of-trade there is a smaller pie to be divided domestically, which requires greater unemployment to clear the resulting inflation conflict. Due to the response of monetary policy, u overshoots in the short run (jumping from E to B on impact of the shock) and falls only gradually along the transition path.

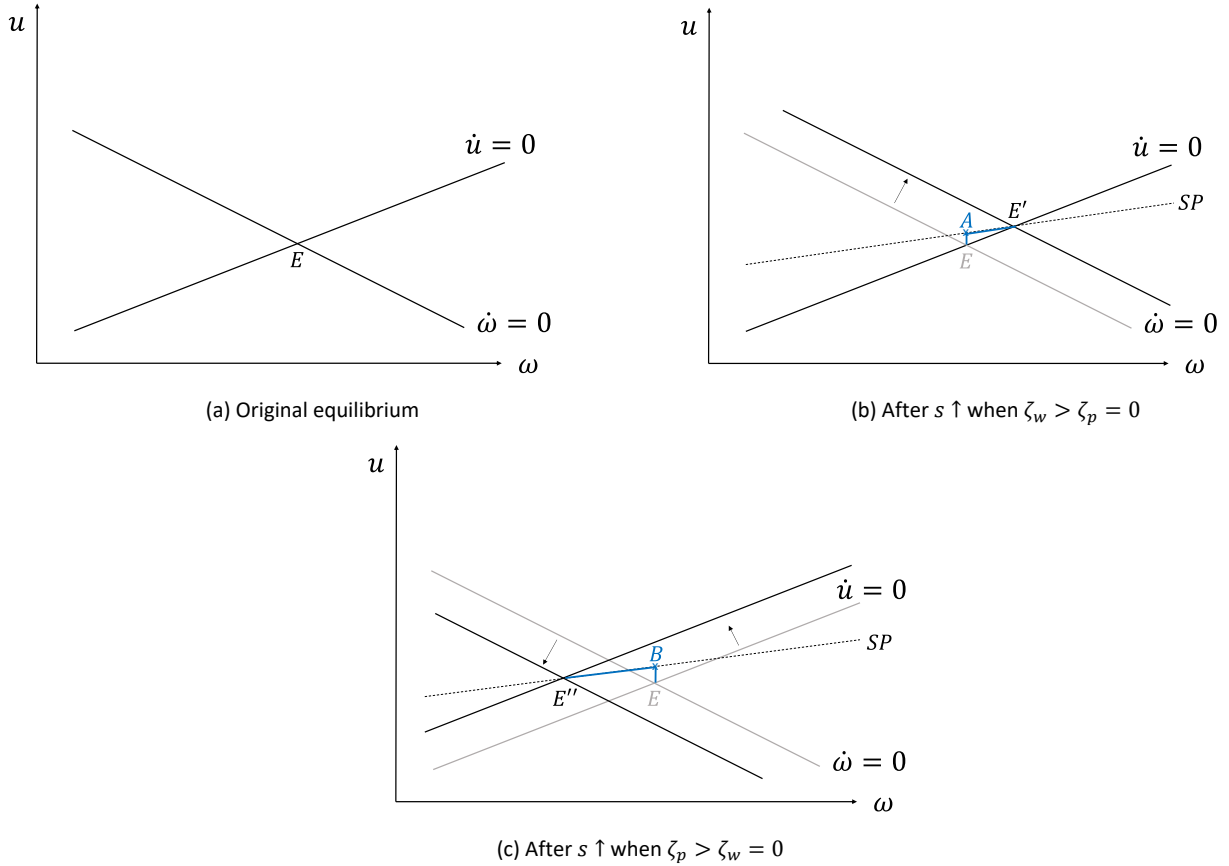


Figure 1: Phase diagrams following an adverse terms-of-trade shock for the case (b) where only workers rely on imports and the case (c) where only firms rely on imports.

2.2.3 The impact of equilibrium reasoning

It is also worthwhile to note that a greater degree of economic sophistication could *decrease* the need for a central bank to respond to adverse terms-of-trade shocks. To see this, suppose that aspirations held by workers and firms are *directly* sensitive to s – reflecting a situation in which workers and firms engage in “equilibrium reasoning”, realizing (and internalizing) that a terms-of-trade loss reduces the size of the pie that is to be divided domestically. In that case, (3) and (4) are extended to:

$$\begin{aligned}\mu_w &= \bar{\mu}_w - k_w u - m_w s, \\ \mu_p &= \bar{\mu}_p - k_p u - m_p s,\end{aligned}$$

where $m_w, m_p > 0$ captures the notion that a worse terms-of-trade will moderate markup aspirations of workers and firms. The conflict-clearing level of unemployment is then given by:

$$u^\diamond = \frac{\bar{\mu}_p + (1 - \zeta_p)\bar{\mu}_w + [(1 - \zeta_p)\zeta_w + \zeta_p - (1 - \zeta_p)m_w - m_p] s}{k_p + (1 - \zeta_p)k_w}.$$

This shows that unemployment ceases to be sensitive to s when:

$$m_p + (1 - \zeta_p)m_w = \zeta_p + (1 - \zeta_p)\zeta_w.$$

An obvious and intuitive constellation that meets this condition is $m_p = \zeta_p$ and $m_w = \zeta_w$. It requires that the sensitivity of aspired markups to s is equal to the import exposure of firms, respectively workers. Hence, a central bank that is able to successfully communicate to workers and firms that, because production and consumption are import-intensive, a terms-of-trade loss reduces the size of the pie that is to be divided domestically, convincing workers and firms to “settle for less”, will be able to bring inflation back to target *without* needing to worsen cyclical conditions.¹⁰

In cases where this does not hold, workers and firms will try to shift the burden on to each other, which ultimately requires the central bank to clear the conflict by affecting the business cycle. That strategy is not reliant on workers and firms thinking through, and internalizing, equilibrium considerations. Instead, it operates by relying on the moderating effect that unemployment has on markup aspirations – tilting the relative bargaining power of workers versus firms (as governed by k_p and k_w) in a way to ensure consistency between competing claims.

3 New-Keynesian setup

Now that we have a better understanding of the role played by cyclical fluctuations in ensuring consistency between the various claims on national income, both statically and dynamically, we move to a new-Keynesian environment – adapted to capture the essence of Section 2’s stylized model. This means that the standard model needs to be enriched with sticky wages, as well as with an optimal flexible-price markup rule that varies with the

¹⁰Such a benign outcome is likely to require a substantial degree of coordination between representatives of both workers and firms, as this is ultimately a story of internalizing externalities. Interestingly, this is what the Dutch corporatist “polder model” is all about. From 1982 onwards, Dutch labor unions, employers’ organizations, and government have been engaging in regular dialogue with the aim of maximizing employment opportunities whilst bringing down inflation via nominal wage restraint (supported by other policies, such as directed tax cuts), with considerable success. See Visser (1998) for a discussion.

business cycle (so that it can act like a clearing mechanism, taming “excessive” markup aspirations if need be). Given the aim of this paper, we do not take an explicit stance on the exact origins of this cyclicalitly – as discussed in the Introduction, reasons to suspect that such cyclicalitly exists abound – choosing to focus on its implications instead.¹¹

As we will show in Section 3.3, the cyclicalitly of the optimal frictionless markups has important consequences for the stability of the system and the associated Taylor principle. In particular, we will show that when

- (a) frictionless price (or wage) markups are countercyclical, and
- (b) the slope of the new-Keynesian Phillips curve is rather flat,

following an active Taylor rule may lead to indeterminacy – unless the rule features a strong enough response to the output gap. Hence, a constellation of (a) and (b) may call for a more “dovish” conduct of monetary policy (less sensitive to inflation, more to the output gap).

3.1 Model

Our model builds on Erceg, Henderson, and Levin (2000, “EHL”), who enriched the standard new-Keynesian sticky-price model with sticky wages. We augment this with an elasticity of substitution between varieties “ ε ” that fluctuates with the business cycle.¹² We equate the latter to the output gap ($y_t \equiv \mathbf{y}_t - \mathbf{y}_t^*$, the log-deviation of output from its efficient level) but one may also think of an unemployment gap if one prefers to stay closer in spirit to Layard and Nickell (1986). Introducing cyclicalitly in substitution elasticities is not crucial to our model *per se*, but forms a tractable way of producing frictionless desired markups that vary with the output gap (which is crucial to our model), enabling us to capture the essence of the stylized setup discussed in Section 2. Since the determinacy issue to which we will turn next is more easily established in continuous time, we work in that setting. This also eases comparisons with our results in Section 2.2, but is by no means essential. In contrast to Section 2, we now focus on a closed economy (so, in terms of our earlier notation, $\zeta_p = \zeta_w = 0$).

¹¹Ultimately, it is important to understand better *why* desired markups vary over the cycle – also since that mechanism could imply that the degree of cyclicalitly varies with the source of the driving shock (Nekarda and Ramey, 2020). We leave this issue for future work and proceed under the assumption that at least the direction of cyclicalitly (pro- or countercyclical?) is independent of the driving force.

¹²This makes our model also related to Steinsson (2003), who considered *exogenous* fluctuations in substitution elasticities between goods varieties.

While the EHL-model is well known, its continuous-time formulation is less common; moreover, our extension to cyclical markups is novel. Consequently, we start with a brief description of the model. Time is continuous and the model hosts a continuum of monopolistically competitive firms (indexed by $i \in [0, 1]$) who all produce a differentiated good, $Y_{i,t}$. Those are subsequently aggregated into a final output good with an aggregator featuring an elasticity of substitution between varieties denoted by ε_p , where the novel feature is that ε_p varies with the output gap, i.e., $\varepsilon_p = \varepsilon_p(y_t)$:

$$Y_t = \left[\int_0^1 Y_{i,t}^{\frac{\varepsilon_p(y_t)-1}{\varepsilon_p(y_t)}} di \right]^{\frac{\varepsilon_p(y_t)}{\varepsilon_p(y_t)-1}}.$$

Associated with this output aggregator, there is also the aggregate price index: $P_t = \left[\int_0^1 P_{i,t}^{1-\varepsilon_p(y_t)} di \right]^{1/(1-\varepsilon_p(y_t))}$.

With respect to the cyclicality of $\varepsilon_p(y_t)$ we assume a constant super-elasticity $\eta_p \equiv -\frac{d\varepsilon_p(y_t)}{dy_t} \frac{1+y_t}{\varepsilon_p(y_t)}$.¹³ The function $\varepsilon_p(\cdot)$ is such that when $\eta_p = 0$, $\varepsilon_p(y_t) = \varepsilon_p(0) \forall y_t$. To ensure positive marginal revenues we make the standard assumption that $\varepsilon_p(y_t) > 1$ for all possible realizations of y_t . Given the aggregator structure, it is well known that the desired frictionless price markup (applied to the firm's marginal cost) is equal to:

$$\mu_{p,t}(y_t) = \frac{\varepsilon_p(y_t)}{\varepsilon_p(y_t) - 1},$$

for which it is the case that $\text{sgn}(d\mu_{p,t}/dy_t) = \text{sgn}(\eta_p)$ – hence why $\text{sgn}(\eta_p)$ determines the cyclicality of the price markup. If $\eta_p > 0$, the elasticity of substitution is falling in y_t ($d\varepsilon_p(y_t)/dy_t < 0$) and the frictionless price markup is procyclical ($d\mu_{p,t}/dy_t > 0$), while $\eta_p < 0$ implies markup countercyclical in a flexible-price world.¹⁴ Note that the way in which we have made the frictionless markup a function of cyclical conditions (here, the output gap y_t) fulfills the role played by equation (4) in Section 2's simple model. In the new-Keynesian setup the markup rule is grounded in the elasticity of substitution between varieties (ε) but our results continue to hold when envisioning a more general markup rule $\mu(y_t)$, which could leave room for true “aspirations” – not necessarily rooted in rational arguments, but driven by conceptions of what markup agents feel entitled to. This is closer to the setting envisioned by Layard and Nickell (1986), and our model in Section 2.

¹³Because the output gap y_t can also be negative, we assume that the super-elasticity is driven by *one plus* the output gap (“ $1 + y_t$ ”) to ensure that the second term of the elasticity formula is always positive.

¹⁴Keep in mind that the *ultimate* degree of markup cyclicality is also affected by nominal rigidities. For example, the standard new-Keynesian model (which has acyclical frictionless markups, alongside flexible wages) still features countercyclical price markups due to price stickiness.

Along similar lines, there is a continuum of monopolistically competitive households (indexed by $j \in [0, 1]$) who all supply a differentiated labor service to firms. As with goods, the different varieties of labor services are imperfect substitutes with an elasticity of substitution “ ε_w ” that similarly varies with the output gap – now with constant super-elasticity η_w ; as before, if $\eta_w = 0$ it will be the case that $\varepsilon_w(y_t) = \varepsilon_w(0) \quad \forall y_t$. Aggregate labor services are given by:

$$N_t = \left[\int_0^1 N_{j,t}^{\frac{\varepsilon_w(y_t)-1}{\varepsilon_w(y_t)}} dj \right]^{\frac{\varepsilon_w(y_t)}{\varepsilon_w(y_t)-1}}.$$

Similar to with prices, this aggregator structure is associated with the aggregate wage index $W_t = \left[\int_0^1 W_{j,t}^{1-\varepsilon_w(y_t)} dj \right]^{1/(1-\varepsilon_w(y_t))}$ and the following desired frictionless wage markup (applied to the household’s marginal rate of substitution between consumption and leisure, with *real wage* $= \mu_{w,t}(y_t) \cdot MRS_{C,L}$),

$$\mu_{w,t}(y_t) = \frac{\varepsilon_w(y_t)}{\varepsilon_w(y_t) - 1}.$$

Analogous to the price markup, we again have that $\text{sgn}(d\mu_{w,t}/dy_t) = \text{sgn}(\eta_w)$, so $\text{sgn}(\eta_w)$ determines the cyclicity of the wage markup.

Firm i sets prices with an eye to maximizing the present discounted value of profits, subject to a price adjustment cost of the Rotemberg (1982) type (parameterized by $\psi_p > 0$).¹⁵ Using $N_{i,t}$ to denote the labor services utilized by firm i , this means that their per-period profits are given by:

$$P_{i,t}Y_{i,t} - W_{i,t}N_{i,t} - \frac{\psi_p}{2} \left(\frac{\dot{P}_{i,t}}{P_{i,t}} \right)^2 P_t Y_t.$$

Here, W is the nominal wage rate, while the last term captures that price adjustment costs are proportional to the value of total output PY .

When maximizing the present discounted value of future profits (while entertaining the household’s discount rate ϱ), firms are subject to the demand curve for their product as well as their production technology (which follows the simple linear relation $Y_{i,t} = N_{i,t}$):

$$Y_{i,t} = \left(\frac{P_{i,t}}{P_t} \right)^{-\varepsilon_p(y_t)} Y_t,$$

¹⁵Rotemberg pricing and Calvo pricing are first-order equivalent (Roberts, 1995); the same will apply to the setup for wage stickiness (see below).

$$N_{i,t} = Y_{i,t}.$$

Solving the associated problem (and exploiting symmetry) leads to the standard new-Keynesian Phillips curve that one obtains with Rotemberg pricing – but adapted to allow ε_p to be a function of the output gap y_t . Taking a log-linear approximation around the steady state yields:

$$\dot{\pi}_t = \varrho \pi_t - \frac{\varepsilon_p(0) - 1}{\psi_p} \omega_t - \frac{\eta_p}{\psi_p} y_t \quad (17)$$

where $\pi_t \equiv \dot{P}_t/P_t$ represents the aggregate rate of price inflation, while $\varepsilon_p(0)$ is the elasticity of substitution between good-varieties when $y_t = 0$ (i.e., when the output gap is closed). The final term (in blue) is novel and represents the first-order approximation to the fact that the substitution elasticity is not constant at $\varepsilon_p(0)$ in the model, but varies with the output gap y_t as governed by its super-elasticity η_p .

Each household j maximizes the present discounted value of its per-period utility stream, which is given by:

$$\log C_{j,t} - \frac{N_{j,t}^{1+\theta}}{1+\theta},$$

subject to demand for their labor services as well as their period budget constraint, which features wage adjustment costs of the Rotemberg (1982) type (parameterized by ψ_w):

$$N_{j,t} = \left(\frac{W_{j,t}}{W_t} \right)^{-\varepsilon_w(y_t)} N_t,$$

$$\dot{B}_{j,t} = W_{j,t} N_{j,t} + R_t B_{j,t} - P_{j,t} C_{j,t} - \frac{\psi_w}{2} \left(\frac{\dot{W}_t}{W_t} \right)^2 P_t Y_t + T_t,$$

where B_j are household j 's bond holdings, R is the nominal interest rate, and T is the lump-sum component of income (including taxes).

Exploiting symmetry, this setup gives rise to the consumption Euler equation:

$$\dot{c}_t = R_t - \pi_t - \varrho, \quad (18)$$

where we use lower-case letters to denote natural logarithms of the original variable, i.e., $c_t \equiv \ln C_t$ so that $\dot{c}_t = \dot{C}_t/C_t$ (the growth rate of consumption). Solving the household's wage-setting problem produces the following new-Keynesian Phillips curve for nominal

wages (again allowing for ε_w to be systematically related to the output gap y_t):

$$\dot{\pi}_{w,t} = \varrho \pi_{w,t} - \frac{\varepsilon_w(0) - 1}{\psi_w} [\theta n_t + y_t - \omega_t] - \frac{\eta_w}{\psi_w} y_t, \quad (19)$$

where $\pi_{w,t} \equiv \dot{W}_t/W_t$ represents the rate of nominal wage growth. As with (17), the additional blue term stems from taking a first-order approximation to the fact that the elasticity of substitution between different labor types is not constant at its steady-state value $\varepsilon_w(0)$ but varies with the output gap y_t as governed by super-elasticity η_w .

The model is furthermore characterized by a law of motion for the log of the real wage rate $\omega_t \equiv w_t - p_t$:

$$\dot{\omega}_t = \pi_{w,t} - \pi_t, \quad (20)$$

and the aggregate production function, which reads (in logs):

$$y_t = n_t. \quad (21)$$

The model is closed by a monetary policy rule, for which we will assume a simple formulation that responds to inflation and the output gap (with $\phi_\pi, \phi_y \geq 0$):

$$R_t = \phi_\pi \pi_t + \phi_y y_t. \quad (22)$$

As before, we say that a central bank with $\phi_\pi > 1$ abides by the Taylor principle.

The crucial modifications, relative to the standard EHL model, are the final terms featuring in the Phillips curves for prices and wages (the blue terms in equations (17) and (19)): they capture the effect that cyclicalities in the price- and wage-markups has on price and wage inflation. When $\eta_p > 0$ the optimal flexible-price markup of prices over marginal cost is procyclical, meaning that a negative output gap works to lower inflation by reducing price markup aspirations; but when $\eta_p < 0$ (i.e., when the frictionless markup is countercyclical), a negative output gap *increases* inflation. In this case firms wish to raise their markup as the economy falters. Per equation (19) a similar effect operates over wage inflation whenever $\eta_w \neq 0$. By standard logic, the strength of this effect is decreasing in the price/wage adjustment cost parameters, ψ_p and ψ_w .

3.2 Dynamics following monetary policy shocks

At this stage it may be instructive to analyze the model's dynamics when markups are cyclical, and compare Impulse Response Functions (IRFs) following a plain-vanilla mon-

etary policy shock. In particular, we consider IRFs to a persistent, additive shock to the monetary policy rule (22), where we set $\phi_y = 0$ for simplicity. In discrete time (to facilitate numerical implementation with standard packages, in our case Dynare), this can be represented as:

$$R_t = \phi_\pi \pi_t + \nu_t,$$

$$\nu_t = \rho_\nu \nu_{t-1} + \epsilon_t^R.$$

ν_t thus follows an AR(1) process, while ϵ_t^R is an i.i.d. innovation.

Table 1 describes the calibration, which is fairly common for the standard parameters. But our extended model also features cyclical price and wage markups, as governed by η_p and η_w respectively. Estimating these super-elasticities is not straightforward, and doing so carefully goes well beyond the scope of our paper. Instead, we will just pick illustrative values for these. In particular, for the dashed lines in Figure 2 we will set $\eta_p = 15$ or $\eta_p = -15$ (where the sign depends on whether we want the price markup to be pro- or countercyclical). This implies that, starting from steady state ($y_t = 0$; $\varepsilon_p(0) = 6$), a 1% opening up of the output gap will move ε_p by about one unit. The wage markup is believed to be more decidedly procyclical (capturing the notion that workers have lower bargaining power in downturns) and we set it equal to $2x|\eta_p|$ for the dashed lines in Figure 2. The standard EHL model results for $\eta_p = \eta_w = 0$.

Table 1: Calibration (quarterly frequency)

Parameter	Description	Value	Comments
β	quarterly discount factor	0.99	4% annual risk free rate
$\varepsilon_p(0)$	substitution elasticity b/w goods varieties	6	as in Christiano et al. (2005)
$\varepsilon_w(0)$	substitution elasticity b/w labor varieties	21	as in Christiano et al. (2005)
θ	inverse Frisch elasticity of labor supply	1	as in Gali (2008)
ψ_p	adjustment cost for prices	58.8	match NKPC slope of Gali (2008)
ψ_w	adjustment cost for wages	117.6	2x that for prices
ϕ_π	Taylor coefficient on inflation	1.1	moderately active monetary policy
ρ_ν	autocorrelation of monetary shock	0.75	moderately persistent shock
η_p	super-elasticity of price markup cyclical	± 15	see text
η_w	super-elasticity of wage markup cyclical	30	2x as cyclical as the price markup

Given this calibration (which delivers determinacy; more on which in Section 3.3) Figure 2 shows the IRFs following a contractionary monetary policy shock. The most prominent difference shows up in the response of price inflation: if the price markup is countercyclical ($\eta_p < 0$), the ensuing recession creates an upward pressure on the price level – due to firms increasing their markups during downturns (this is our “aspirational” transmission channel working in the inflationary direction). This may even lead to a “price puzzle” at short horizons, as visible in Figure 2; at longer horizons, Phillips’ force takes over, reducing inflation by lowering real wage pressures. For higher (i.e., more positive) values of η_p the price puzzle disappears, but for $\eta_p < 0$ the response of inflation is always more muted relative to the response in the standard EHL model ($\eta_p = 0$).

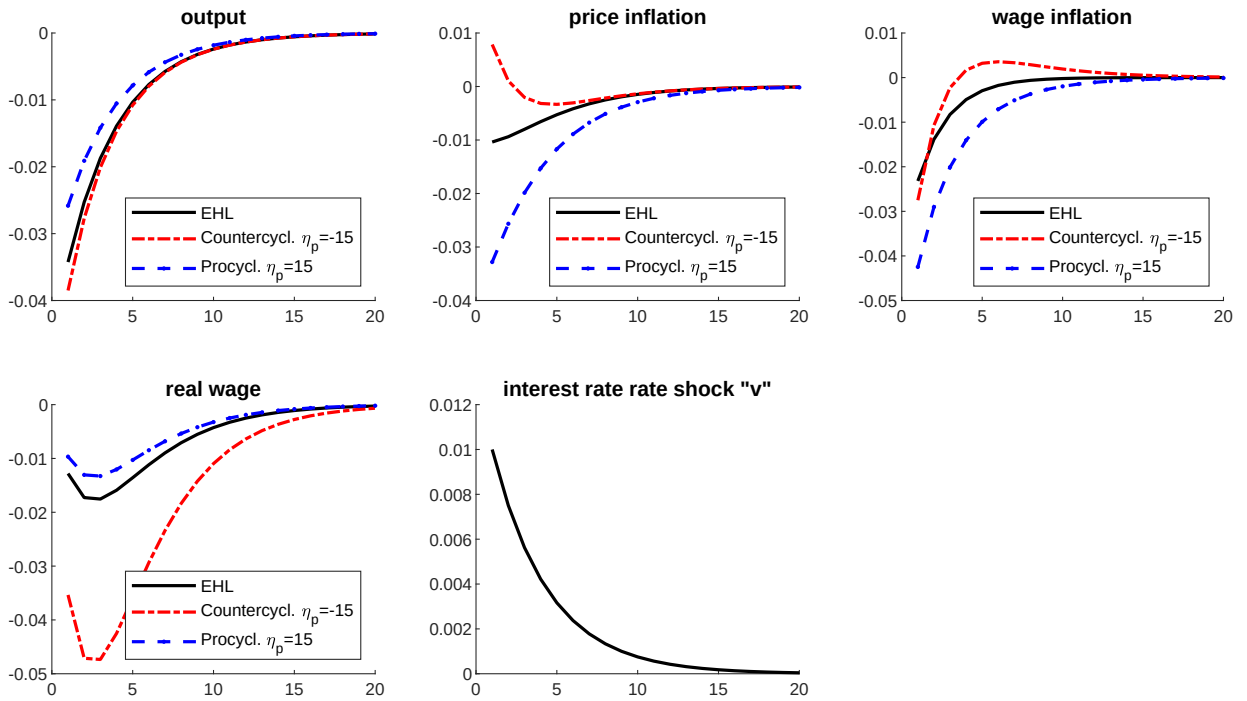


Figure 2: Role of cyclicity of price markups: IRFs following a contractionary monetary policy shock, quarterly frequency.

The introduction of price markup countercyclicalities thus works similar to increasing the degree of nominal rigidities – with a stronger output response as a result (see the top-left panel of Figure 2). In this sense, countercyclical price markups can be seen as a source of “real rigidity” – helpful with an eye towards generating greater monetary non-neutralities *without* resorting to mechanically lowering price flexibility. Due to inflation falling by less when $\eta_p < 0$, the monetary contraction induces a bigger (and more

persistent) hit to the real wage, relative to the standard EHL model. If the price markup is procyclical on the other hand, inflation is more responsive to monetary policy shocks (and output less so).

3.3 Determinacy

Now that we better understand the model dynamics, let us analyze its stability properties. Our economy can be summarized by a four-dimensional state-space system featuring the output gap, price inflation, wage inflation, and the real wage rate (with only the latter being pre-determined); see Appendix B. The determinant of the Jacobian is given by:

$$\begin{aligned} \det(J) = & -(\phi_\pi - 1) \left[\frac{\varepsilon_w(0) - 1}{\psi_w} \frac{\eta_p}{\psi_p} + \frac{\varepsilon_p(0) - 1}{\psi_p} \frac{(\varepsilon_w(0) - 1)(1 + \theta) + \eta_w}{\psi_w} \right] \\ & - \phi_y \varrho \left[\frac{\varepsilon_p(0) - 1}{\psi_p} + \frac{\varepsilon_w(0) - 1}{\psi_w} \right]. \end{aligned} \quad (23)$$

Armed with (23) we can formulate the following lemma, which will be useful in subsequently proving our main propositions:

Lemma 1. *The REE is determinate if $\det(J) < 0$.*

Proof. See Appendix B.

Using Lemma 1, and first proceeding under the assumption that the central bank sets the interest rate solely with an eye towards inflation (neglecting the output gap, i.e., with $\phi_y = 0$ in (22)), we can establish our main result:

Proposition 2. *Under $\phi_y = 0$, the central bank abiding by the Taylor principle ($\phi_\pi > 1$) yields determinacy of the REE iff*

$$\eta_p + (\varepsilon_p(0) - 1) \left(1 + \theta + \frac{\eta_w}{\varepsilon_w(0) - 1} \right) > 0. \quad (24)$$

Proof. We know from Lemma 1 that we need $\det(J) < 0$ to obtain determinacy. If $\phi_\pi > 1$, this requires condition (24) to hold. ■

This result tells us that the Taylor principle only delivers determinacy when an appropriate transformation of “aggregate markups” (summing over both price- and wage

markups) is procyclical. In that case, a cyclical deterioration ($y_t \downarrow$) is able to reduce aggregate markup aspirations to a degree that suffices to ensure determinacy. Note how (24) looks very much like the condition that resulted from Section 2's simple model. There, the central bank responding solely to inflation (with $\phi_\pi > 1$) led to a determinacy condition that read $\tilde{k}_p + k_w > 0$, telling us that abiding by the Taylor principle will only produce a determinate equilibrium when markups, on aggregate, are procyclical. The same core message emerges from (24), as it also features the sum of the terms governing price- and wage markup cyclicity (η_p and η_w , respectively). In the new-Keynesian setup, however, one no longer ends up with a simple sum. Instead, some adjustments are needed for the slopes of the price- and wage Phillips curves ($(\varepsilon_p(0) - 1)$ and $(\varepsilon_w(0) - 1)$, respectively), alongside the labor supply elasticity θ .

Note how Proposition 2 also implies that:

Corollary 2. *Under $\phi_y = 0$ and $\eta_p + (\varepsilon_p(0) - 1) \left(1 + \theta + \frac{\eta_w}{\varepsilon_w(0) - 1}\right) < 0$, determinacy of the REE requires $\phi_\pi < 1$.*

To see through this case, and understand the role played by the slope of the Phillips curve for prices, consider the case of $\varepsilon_p(0) \searrow 1$. The new-Keynesian Phillips curve is now totally flat, implying that real wages no longer affect inflation. But with countercyclical price markups ($\eta_p < 0$) a negative output gap pushes up inflation by our “aspirational” transmission channel, which has the effect of raising firms’ desired price markups $\mu_{p,t}$. So when a central bank then responds to an inflationary shock by raising real rates – in an attempt to bring down inflation by cooling the economy – it ends up *feeding* the inflationary process by raising firms’ desired frictionless markups. In this (rather extreme) environment, the central bank should behave passively ($\phi_\pi < 1$) to resolve the “battle of the markups” and deliver determinacy.

If the new-Keynesian Phillips curve is positively sloped ($\varepsilon_p(0) > 1$), pursuing an active Taylor rule becomes more compatible with determinacy – even when frictionless price markups are countercyclical ($\eta_p < 0$): in this case a monetary contraction may still raise price markups, but if $\eta_w > 0$ and the slope of the Phillips curve is steep enough, the central bank can lower inflation by cooling the economy.¹⁶ The force of this effect will be magnified by any procyclicality in the frictionless wage markup ($\eta_w > 0$): in that case a cyclical deterioration ends up lowering the market power of workers, thereby

¹⁶Observe that abstracting from markup cyclicity altogether (i.e., setting $\eta_p = \eta_w = 0$) yields $\det(J) = -(\phi - 1) \left[\frac{\varepsilon_p - 1}{\psi_p} \frac{(\varepsilon_w - 1)(1 + \theta)}{\psi_w} \right]$. Since the term in square brackets (“Phillips’ force”) is always positive in the benchmark model, this produces the standard finding that the equilibrium is determinate if monetary policy is active ($\phi > 1$).

moderating wage markup aspirations ($\mu_{w,t}$), which cools inflation. In the knife-edge case where $\frac{\eta_p}{\varepsilon_p(0)-1} = -\left(1 + \theta + \frac{\eta_w}{\varepsilon_w(0)-1}\right)$ the model encounters the singularity first seen in Section 2.1 (when $\tilde{k}_p = -k_w$ over there), implying that monetary policy cannot deliver determinacy. In that case, the force coming from our new “aspirational” transmission channel perfectly offsets the standard channel, and fluctuations in cyclical conditions are not able to affect the (model-relevant transformation of) markup aspirations of firms versus workers in a way to deliver determinacy.^{17,18}

At this point it is interesting to contrast our findings to those of Layard and Nickell (1986): they favor the case of countercyclical price markups ($\eta_p < 0$, in our notation) and suggest that a situation of inconsistent aspirations (with workers preferring a higher real wage than firms) is ultimately resolved through greater unemployment (or, in terms of our model, a negative output gap). Our analysis (which captures their logic in a forward-looking new-Keynesian environment, while conducting a formal analysis of the stability issue) qualifies this point. In particular, our analysis makes clear that this is only true if the impact of real wages on inflation (determined by the slope of the Phillips curve $(\varepsilon_p(0) - 1)/\psi_p$) is sufficiently strong relative to any countercyclicality in frictionless markups. If the Phillips curve is rather flat, countercyclical price markups ($\eta_p < 0$) may well call for a *positive* output gap (*lower* unemployment) in order to resolve the “battle of the markups” – in that case by working to lower firms’ markup aspirations.

Now, let us return to the more general monetary policy rule (22) which responds to the output gap with $\phi_y > 0$. In that case, Proposition 2 generalizes to:

Proposition 3. *If $\eta_p + (\varepsilon_p(0) - 1) \left(1 + \theta + \frac{\eta_w}{\varepsilon_w(0)-1}\right) > 0$ and $\phi_y > 0$, determinacy of the REE requires*

$$\phi_\pi > 1 - \varrho\phi_y \left[\frac{\varepsilon_p(0) - 1}{\psi_p} + \frac{\varepsilon_w(0) - 1}{\psi_w} \right] \left[\frac{\varepsilon_w(0) - 1}{\psi_w} \frac{\eta_p}{\psi_p} + \frac{\varepsilon_p(0) - 1}{\psi_p} \frac{(\varepsilon_w(0) - 1)(1 + \theta) + \eta_w}{\psi_w} \right]^{-1}, \quad (25)$$

and condition (36) in Appendix B if $\eta_p > 0$ or condition (37) in Appendix B if $\eta_p < 0$.

Corollary 3. *If $\eta_p + (\varepsilon_p(0) - 1) \left(1 + \theta + \frac{\eta_w}{\varepsilon_w(0)-1}\right) < 0$ and $\phi_y > 0$, determinacy of*

¹⁷The standard new-Keynesian model encounters the exact same issue if the utility function were $\log C_{j,t} - \log N_{j,t}$. In that case, the intratemporal optimality condition would boil down to (in logs) $w_t - p_t = 0$, implying that the real wage cannot adjust in order to stabilize the system.

¹⁸Note that countercyclicality in the frictionless wage markup ($\eta_w < 0$) has similar implications to a countercyclical price markup: when η_w becomes negative enough (so that (24) fails), active monetary policy fails to deliver determinacy. The intuition is similar to before: when $\eta_w < 0$ a monetary contraction raises workers’ wage markup aspirations, which is inflationary when the Phillips curve is positively sloped. Since countercyclical wage markups are difficult to reconcile with the standard notion that workers have less bargaining power during recessions, we see this case as of limited practical relevance.

the REE requires

$$\phi_\pi < 1 - \varrho\phi_y \left[\frac{\varepsilon_p(0) - 1}{\psi_p} + \frac{\varepsilon_w(0) - 1}{\psi_w} \right] \left[\frac{\varepsilon_w(0) - 1}{\psi_w} \frac{\eta_p}{\psi_p} + \frac{\varepsilon_p(0) - 1}{\psi_p} \frac{(\varepsilon_w(0) - 1)(1 + \theta) + \eta_w}{\psi_w} \right]^{-1}, \quad (26)$$

and condition (36) in Appendix B if $\eta_p > 0$ or condition (37) in Appendix B if $\eta_p < 0$.

In both cases the proof is analogous to that of Proposition 2. In practice, it turns out that the additional conditions (36)-(37) in Appendix B (which only come into play when $\phi_y > 0$) are implied by (25)-(26) for all reasonable parameter values, which is why we have relegated them to the Appendix; it is only when prices become highly flexible that conditions (36)-(37) from Appendix B *may* become relevant.

If $\eta_p + (\varepsilon_p(0) - 1) \left(1 + \theta + \frac{\eta_w}{\varepsilon_w(0) - 1} \right) > 0$, which includes the original EHL model where frictionless markups are acyclical ($\eta_p = \eta_w = 0$), Proposition 3 demonstrates that the central bank responding to the output gap (via $\phi_y > 0$) enables it to ensure determinacy while responding less strongly to inflation (this can also be inferred from Galí's (2008) numerical analysis, see his Figure 6.2, but Proposition 3 shows this analytically).

However, when there is strong enough countercyclicality in markups so that

$$\eta_p + (\varepsilon_p(0) - 1) \left(1 + \theta + \frac{\eta_w}{\varepsilon_w(0) - 1} \right) < 0,$$

Corollary 3 shows that the central bank responding to the output gap (via $\phi_y > 0$) creates room for it to respond more strongly to inflation (as the final term in (26) is negative in this case) – potentially even “actively” (i.e., with $\phi_\pi > 1$), which is not compatible with determinacy when $\phi_y = 0$. The intuition is the same as in our simple model presented in Section 2: the central bank's countercyclical response to the output gap puts a break on the inflation driven by the countercyclicality in firms' markup aspirations – making the conventional Taylor principle (“ $\phi_\pi > 1$ ”) more compatible with determinacy. This effect is more powerful when Phillips' force is strong (as captured by the term $\frac{\varepsilon_p(0)-1}{\psi_p} + \frac{\varepsilon_w(0)-1}{\psi_w}$ in (25)-(26), which is the sum of the slope of the Phillips curve for prices and that for wages).

We can thus conclude that countercyclicality in frictionless markups may require a central bank that wishes to avoid indeterminacy to adopt a more “dovish” approach – responding less aggressively to inflation, or more strongly to the output gap.

3.4 Optimal monetary policy

Thus far, we have solely been concerned with questions of determinacy in a model with wage-price dynamics alongside cyclicalities of frictionless markups – thereby building on the widely accepted notion that policy makers should prevent equilibrium indeterminacy.

But even when constraining the analysis to those parts of the parameter space where the equilibrium is determinate, there is the question what optimal policy looks like. Inspired by recent events, we consider optimal policy in the face of supply shocks. In particular, we enrich the Phillips curve (17) with an adverse cost-push shock “ x_t ”, which we assume to follow an $AR(1)$ process with persistence parameter ρ_x and i.i.d. innovation ϵ_t^x . Following Steinsson (2003) we focus solely on the distortions arising from nominal rigidities, thus abstracting from the inefficiencies related to the deeper, underlying market structure (which is imperfectly competitive).

The intuition for the results that are to follow are easiest to understand in the case where wages are fully flexible. That leaves us with the standard new-Keynesian model, thus featuring sticky prices, but enriched to allow for price markup cyclicalities (as captured by our super-elasticity η_p). The new-Keynesian Phillips curve now reads:

$$\dot{\pi}_t = \varrho \pi_t - \left(\frac{\varepsilon_p(0) - 1 + \eta_p}{\psi_p} \right) y_t + x_t. \quad (27)$$

Given the period loss function:

$$\mathcal{L}_t = \alpha_p \pi_t^2 + \alpha_y y_t^2, \quad (28)$$

it readily follows that optimal policy under discretion is characterized by:

$$y_t = -\frac{\alpha_p}{\alpha_y} \left(\frac{\varepsilon_p(0) - 1 + \eta_p}{\psi_p} \right) \pi_t. \quad (29)$$

This shows that optimal policy following a cost-push shock looks “more dovish” when price markups are countercyclical ($\eta_p < 0$); the same conclusion follows from solving the problem assuming perfect commitment on the central bank’s part.¹⁹ From (29) we can see that the standard “hawkish” leaning-against-the-wind policy prescription is strengthened when price markups are procyclical ($\eta_p > 0$). In that case, a given increase in inflation calls for output to be reduced by *even more*. However, the opposite holds when price markups are countercyclical ($\eta_p < 0$). There, optimal policy looks more “dovish”, with a reduction

¹⁹In that case, π_t in (29) is replaced by $(p_t - p_{-1})$, where p_{-1} is an implicit price level target determined by the price level in the period before the central bank solved its optimization problem (Gali, 2008).

in η_p having the same effect as increasing α_y (the weight on output stabilization in the loss function (28)). Under strong markup countercyclicality (such that $\varepsilon_p(0) - 1 + \eta_p < 0$), optimal policy even calls on the central bank to *boost* output following an adverse cost-push shock. The reason is that, in this case, the Phillips curve is flat relative to the degree of price markup countercyclicality. As a result, a boom in output does little to boost inflation, while the main effect of $y_t > 0$ is to lower desired price markups, which helps to bring inflation back down.

Now, let us reintroduce wage stickiness and consider the impact of cyclicalities in desired markups in the EHL model. In that case we can characterize the optimal policy numerically. Following Lorenzoni and Werning (2023a), taking a quadratic approximation to the social welfare function yields:

$$\mathcal{L}_t = \left(\frac{\varepsilon_p(0)}{(\varepsilon_p(0) - 1)/\psi_p} \right) \pi_t^2 + \left(\frac{\varepsilon_w(0)}{(\varepsilon_w(0) - 1)/\psi_w} \right) \pi_{w,t}^2 + (1 + \theta) y_t^2. \quad (30)$$

Given (30) one can ask what evolution of endogenous variables minimizes the present value of the central bank's loss function, subject to the model's structure. One can again conduct this exercise either under the assumption that the central bank is perfectly able to commit itself to future policies, or by assuming that it acts under discretion. In what follows, we focus on the latter case, but the key result also arises under commitment. As in Section 3.2, we conduct the analysis with Dynare. Figure 3 shows what optimal policy looks like in response to an adverse cost-push shock, depending on the cyclicalities of price markups; for the case of price markup *procyclicality* we set $\eta_p = 15$, while the case of price markup *countercyclicality* works with $\eta_p = -15$.

As can be seen from the response of the real interest rate, optimal policy continues to look “more dovish” when markups are countercyclical. The reason is that countercyclicality in the price markup means that responding strongly to inflation injects additional volatility into the economy: it lowers output further (worsening that element of the loss function), which, in turn, triggers an inflationary response from firms when $\eta_p < 0$ – only worsening the original inflationary problem. Interestingly, this also implies that when price markups are countercyclical, optimal policy can call for simultaneous price and wage inflation, even under discretion; Figure 3 shows this. As discussed in Lorenzoni and Werning (2023a) this is not possible in the standard case where markups are acyclical. In that case, price- and wage inflation should always carry opposite signs under optimal policy, so that they “cooperate” to move the real wage $\omega_t \equiv w_t - p_t$ in the desired direction.

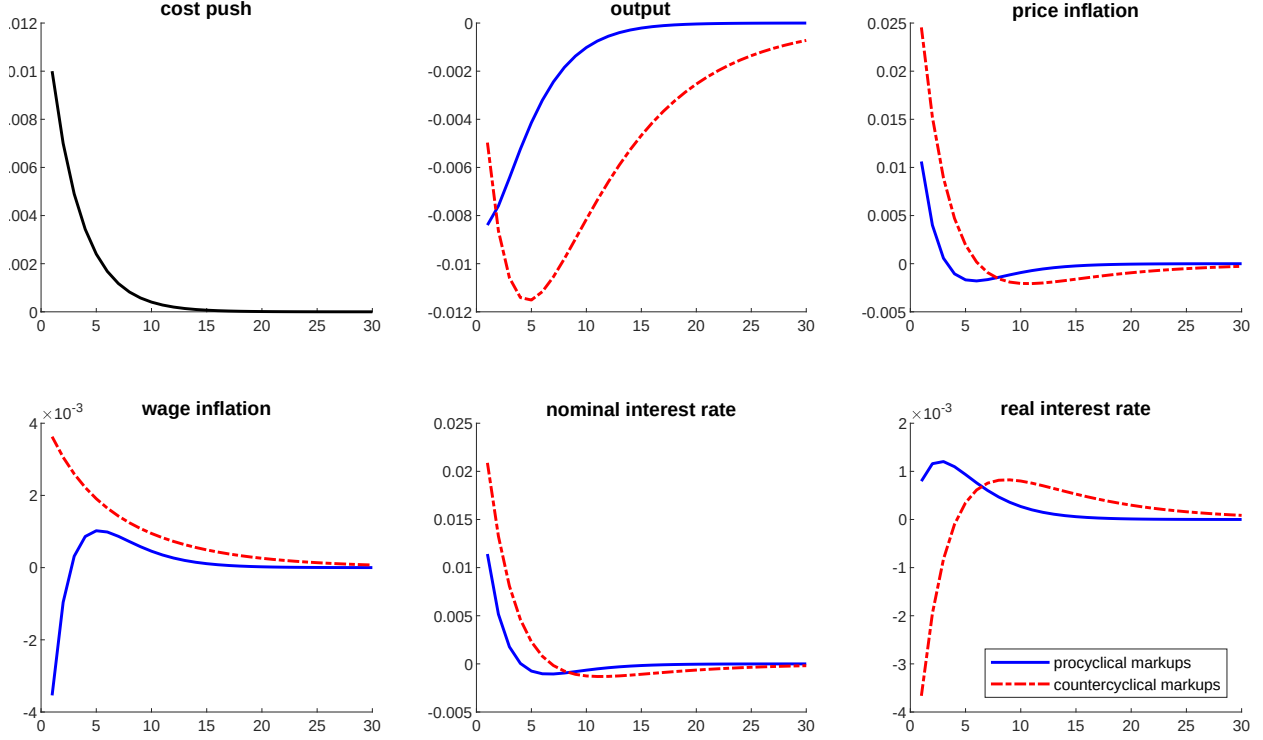


Figure 3: Optimal monetary policy under discretion in the face of cost-push shocks (calibration, at the quarterly frequency, as in Table 1; $\rho_x = 0.6$).

Since the practical implementability of the above approach is at times questioned, it may also be of interest to consider optimal policy when constraining the central bank to a “simple, implementable rule”, responding to observable developments in output and inflation. Since one can moreover question whether central banks in practice care *directly* about wage inflation (their mandates are typically phrased in terms of consumer price inflation, alongside a concern for output developments), we conduct this exercise with an ad-hoc loss function featuring just price inflation and the output gap (per a “dual mandate”):

$$\tilde{\mathcal{L}}_t = \pi_t^2 + 0.5y_t^2. \quad (31)$$

(31) places a 2x bigger weight on inflation stabilization relative to output gap stabilization. This loss function is thought to be a reasonable approximation of actual central bank practices (Carney, 2017). When we subsequently specify the “simple rule” (22), again thought to be a reasonable approximation of central bank behavior, we can ask

what values of ϕ_π and ϕ_y minimize the central bank’s loss for various values of η_p .

As one can see from Figure 4, our previous insights continue to carry over: as frictionless price markups turn less procyclical (lower η_p) it becomes optimal for the central bank to respond less strongly to inflation. The optimal response to the output gap is quite stable, implying that the relative responsiveness to inflation falls as η_p goes down. So, we confirm that also the optimal “simple” policy becomes more dovish as markups turn more countercyclical.

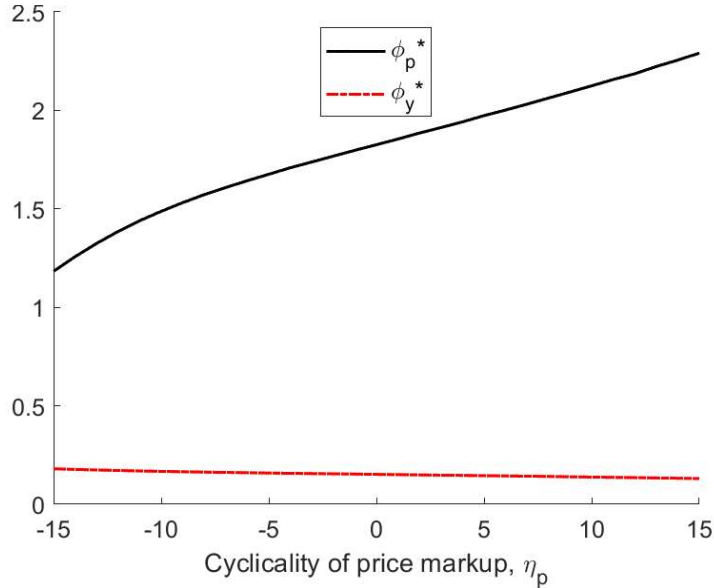


Figure 4: Optimal coefficients in the Taylor rule (22) as a function of η_p in the face of cost-push shocks (calibration, at the quarterly frequency, as in Table 1; $\rho_x = 0.6$).

4 Estimating price markup cyclicity

Our analysis suggests that the cyclicity of markups is an important co-determinant of inflation dynamics, with important implications for optimal policy (as discussed in Section 3.4). Consequently, the degree of price markup cyclicity is an object that should be of interest to monetary policymakers.

In this context, the goal of this section is to estimate the cyclicity of price markups at the country level. To do this, we build on the approach proposed by Hall (1988) and refined by Roeger (1995). This approach has lower data requirements relative to the method of De Loecker and Warzynski (2012), yielding greater cross-country coverage, while being more amenable to capturing cyclicity.²⁰ It starts from the observation that,

²⁰In addition, as discussed in Hall (2018) and De Loecker, Eeckhout, and Unger (2020), the two

away from the perfectly competitive benchmark, price markups are related to the Solow residual (“ SR ”) via the labor share and changes in the capital-labor ratio (see Appendix C for data-related details):

$$SR_t \equiv \Delta q_t - \alpha_t \Delta n_t - (1 - \alpha_t) \Delta k_t = \frac{\mu - 1}{\mu} \cdot \alpha_t (\Delta n_t - \Delta k_t) + \Theta_t. \quad (32)$$

Here, μ is the markup, Δq the change in the log of output, α the labor share in national income, Δn the change in the log of labor input, Δk the change in the log of the capital stock, and Θ the true rate of technological progress (which only equals the Solow residual if $\mu = 1$, i.e., under perfect competition). The difficulty with estimating (32) is that Θ is unobserved, yet plausibly correlated with other right-hand-side variables in (32). This gives rise to an endogeneity problem – creating a need to find a good instrument, exogenous to Θ . As Hall (1988) himself notes, this is very challenging.

Roeger (1995), however, observed that one can also create a “dual” Solow residual (“ DSR ”), in price-space:

$$DSR_t \equiv \alpha_t \Delta w_t + (1 - \alpha_t) \Delta r_t - \Delta p_t = \frac{\mu - 1}{\mu} \cdot \alpha_t (\Delta w_t - \Delta r_t) + \Theta_t. \quad (33)$$

Now, upon subtracting (33) from (32), the unobserved Θ drops out, which eliminates the endogeneity problem. Instead, one can proceed by estimating $\beta \equiv (\mu - 1)/\mu$ from the following equation via OLS:

$$SR_t - DSR_t = \beta x_t + \epsilon_t,$$

where $x_t \equiv \Delta q_t + \Delta p_t - \Delta k_t - \Delta r_t$.

While Roeger’s (1995) original approach is only valid under the assumption of constant markups (which goes against the spirit of our paper), similar steps can be taken to allow for cyclical in the price markup. As shown by Oliveira Martins and Scarpetta (1999), the degree of price markup cyclical inity (η_p) can then be estimated via the following regression (which can again be estimated via OLS):²¹

$$SR_t - DSR_t = \beta x_t + \eta_p [CYC_t x_t + \Delta CYC_t] + \epsilon_t, \quad (34)$$

where CYC_t is the economy’s cyclical stance at time t (for which we use the cyclical residual that obtains from applying the Hamilton (2018) filter to real GDP).

approaches yield reasonably consistent results – at least when applied to U.S. data.

²¹While technically not an elasticity (just an object with the same sign), we use “ η_p ” to point out the more general link with the eponymous object central to Section 3.

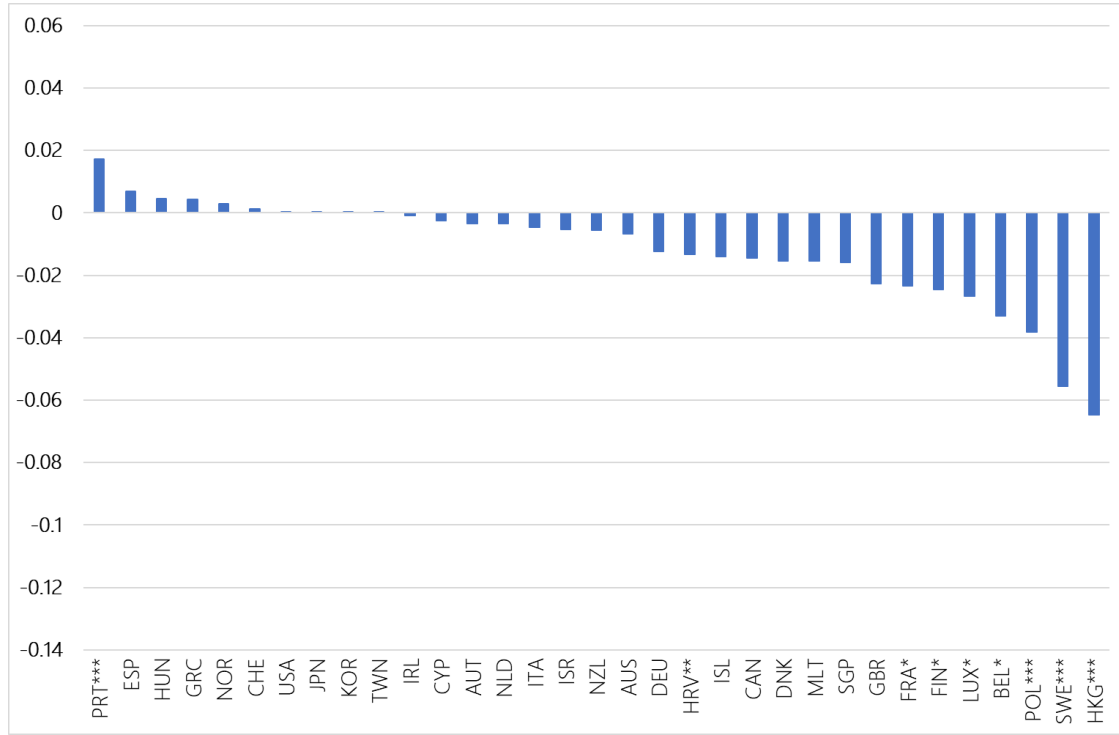
Our estimates for η_p are collected in Figure 5, where the upper panel contains the higher-income countries in our sample, while the lower panel contains the middle-income countries (data limitations prevent us from analyzing the issue in lower-income countries). Two observations stand out. Firstly, for the majority of cases, we estimate price markups to be countercyclical ($\eta_p < 0$), although not always significantly so. This is consistent with the findings (obtained through very different methods) of Acharya et al. (2023), who report that price markups in European countries *increased* as their terms-of-trade worsened post-2021 – which could be interpreted as markups having behaved countercyclically in this instance. It could also be an explanation for the short-run price puzzle often found in empirical studies analyzing the effects of monetary policy shocks (recall the price response in Figure 2 for $\eta_p < 0$).

Secondly, price markup countercyclicality appears to be stronger in middle-income countries – both when it comes to the estimated size as well as statistical significance. This suggests that, in those countries, higher interest rates may have lower *short-run* potency when it comes to reducing inflation, which could explain why the disinflationary power of interest rate hikes is often debated in such countries. Two prominent cases include Turkey and Argentina.²² While our theory suggests that, *ultimately*, higher interest rates will be successful in lowering inflation (as Phillips’ force takes over with time; recall Figure 2), it becomes more difficult to stick with the orthodox prescription (from a practical, political-economy point of view) if it does not deliver in the short run.

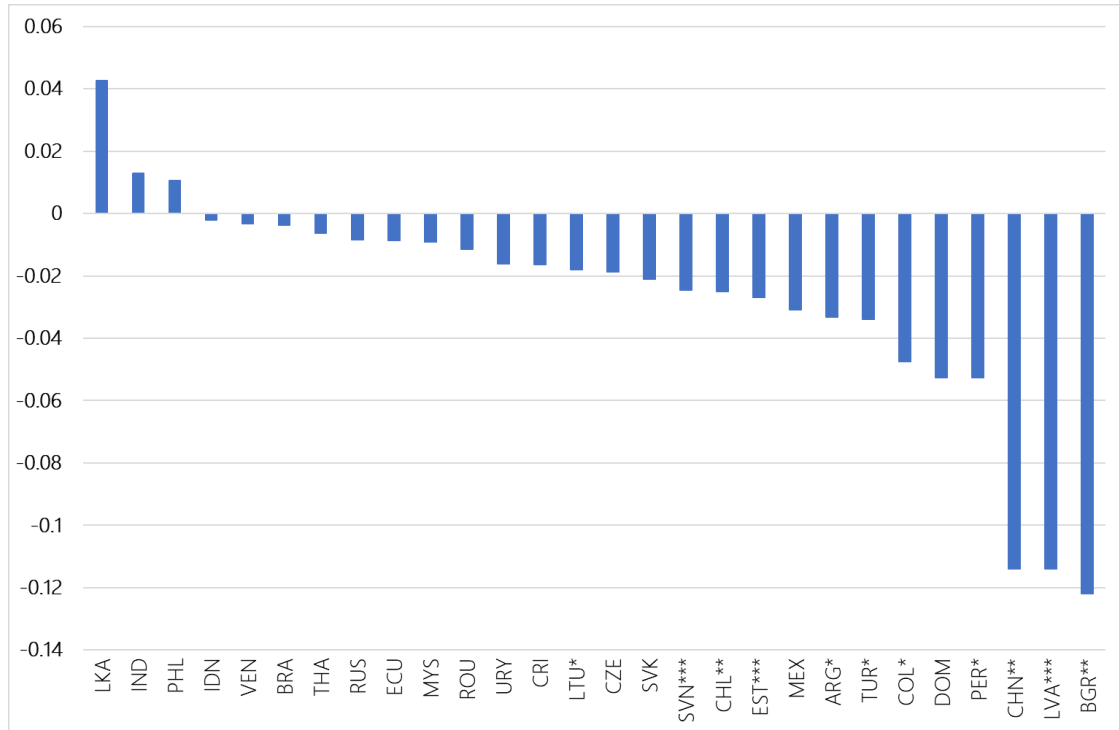
Finally, we end by noting that it may well be that the cyclicity of desired markups is conditional on the type of shock hitting the economy (recall footnote 11). In that case, we would be dealing with $\eta_p(\Xi)$ where $\Xi \in \{\text{monetary shock; cost-push shock; technology shock, ...}\}$. If so, our empirical estimates of η_p should be thought of as representing $\hat{\Sigma}_{\Xi}\eta_p(\Xi)$, where the $\hat{\Sigma}_{\Xi}$ -operator delivers the appropriate average across all shocks driving the business cycle.²³ In any event, this does not rule out the possibility that the cyclicity following atypical shocks is of the opposite sign. Yet, what should be of primary interest to monetary policymakers, is the sign of $\eta_p(\text{monetary shock})$ as that object greatly affects the price response to monetary policy shocks, while also carrying optimal policy implications (as discussed in Section 3.4).

²²Turkish President Erdogan is perhaps the most prominent critic of economic orthodoxy in this regard. In Argentina, President Milei has expressed doubts over the ability of higher interest rates to tame inflation – emphasizing fiscal discipline instead.

²³Whether such an average “business cycle shock” looks similar to a monetary policy shock is debated. While Angeletos, Collard and Dellas (2020) report that the main shock driving business cycles does not look like a monetary policy shock, Bianchi, Nicolo and Song (2023) reach the opposite conclusion once relying on a VAR that distinguishes between trend- and cyclical components.



(a) Higher-income countries



(b) Middle-income countries

Figure 5: Country-level estimates of price markup cyclicality “ η_p ” according to equation (34). * denotes significance at the 10% level, ** at the 5% level, and *** at the 1% level (using Newey-West standard errors).

5 Conclusion

As recently shown by Lorenzoni and Werning (2023ab), conflict over relative prices (in particular: workers and firms disagreeing over the real wage) can be seen as the most proximate cause of inflation. Taking this insight to a new-Keynesian environment featuring cyclically-sensitive markups, we show that there is an important role to be played by monetary policy – provided it is able to affect macroeconomic conditions which, in turn, affect the relative markup aspirations of workers versus firms. This is our new “aspirational” channel of monetary policy transmission.

In a model where aspired markups depend on the state of the business cycle (so that the latter can moderate worker and/or firm aspirations), we show that monetary policy – through its effects on the real economy – can resolve the “conflict” between competing claimants by bringing about changes in the relative market power of workers versus firms. The direction in which monetary policy should move, however, depends crucially on the cyclicity of aspired wage- and price markups. When flexible-price markups are countercyclical, responding strongly to inflation may be undesirable (as the ensuing recession then leads firms *to increase* markups, giving rise to renewed inflationary pressures). This concern is particularly acute when the Phillips curve is rather flat, implying that a reduction of wage pressures does relatively little to bring down inflation – leaving the countervailing force exerted by rising markups as the dominant one. In such cases monetary policy may need to take a more passive stance towards inflation, or place a bigger weight on the output gap – i.e., conduct monetary policy in a more “dovish” way. This implication follows from considerations related to ensuring equilibrium determinacy, as well as from an optimal policy perspective.

Our model furthermore points to the importance of knowing the direction and degree of cyclicity in frictionless markups when conducting monetary policy. Estimating price markup cyclicity across a panel of 61 countries, we find markups to be countercyclical in several of them.

Finally, this paper leaves important questions for future work – particularly when it comes to linking the state of the business cycle to desired frictionless markups. Here, we have taken a reduced-form approach, sticking with the Dixit-Stiglitz setup where the optimal markup is narrowly pinned down by the elasticity of substitution between varieties ε (putting the desired markup at $\varepsilon/(\varepsilon - 1)$). We have furthermore remained agnostic as to which exact theoretical channel gives rise to aspired markups being cyclically sensitive (and whether this suggests that the degree of cyclicity depends on the driving shock). It could however be interesting to consider alternative settings, placing less focus on

the elasticity of substitution between varieties. For example: if markets are modelled in a frictional way, this would give rise to a matching surplus that needs to be split in some way between firms and workers – which could provide a role for outside options, habit formation, or social norms (e.g., notions of “fairness” *a la* Eyster, Madarász, and Michaillat (2020)).

Appendix A

Section 2.2.2 of the main text discusses dynamics following a terms-of-trade shock when the $\dot{u} = 0$ locus slopes up. It is however also possible to have a stable equilibrium when both loci are downward sloping – just with the $\dot{\omega} = 0$ locus carrying the steeper slope, as shown in Figure 6a (which illustrates the case for $\tilde{k}_p < k_w = \phi_u = 0$). Dynamics are different in this case. If $\zeta_w > \zeta_p = 0$ (implying that only workers carry direct exposure to the shock, Figure 6b) a worsening in the terms-of-trade still increases unemployment on impact (as well as in the long run) but in this case the real wage falls along the transition path. Consumers not only see their real consumption wage ($W/[P^{1-\zeta_w}P_f^{\zeta_w}]$) fall, but their real wage in terms of the domestic price level (W/P) falls as well, implying *negative* pass-through: firms, who carry no direct exposure to the shock when $\zeta_p = 0$, end up *benefitting* from an adverse terms-of-trade shock. In this case, the pain is not shared between workers and firms, but stays with the workers (who carry the original exposure to the shock) and multiplies there due to the countercyclical of price markups ($\tilde{k}_p < 0$, meaning that the rise in unemployment makes firms charge higher markups).

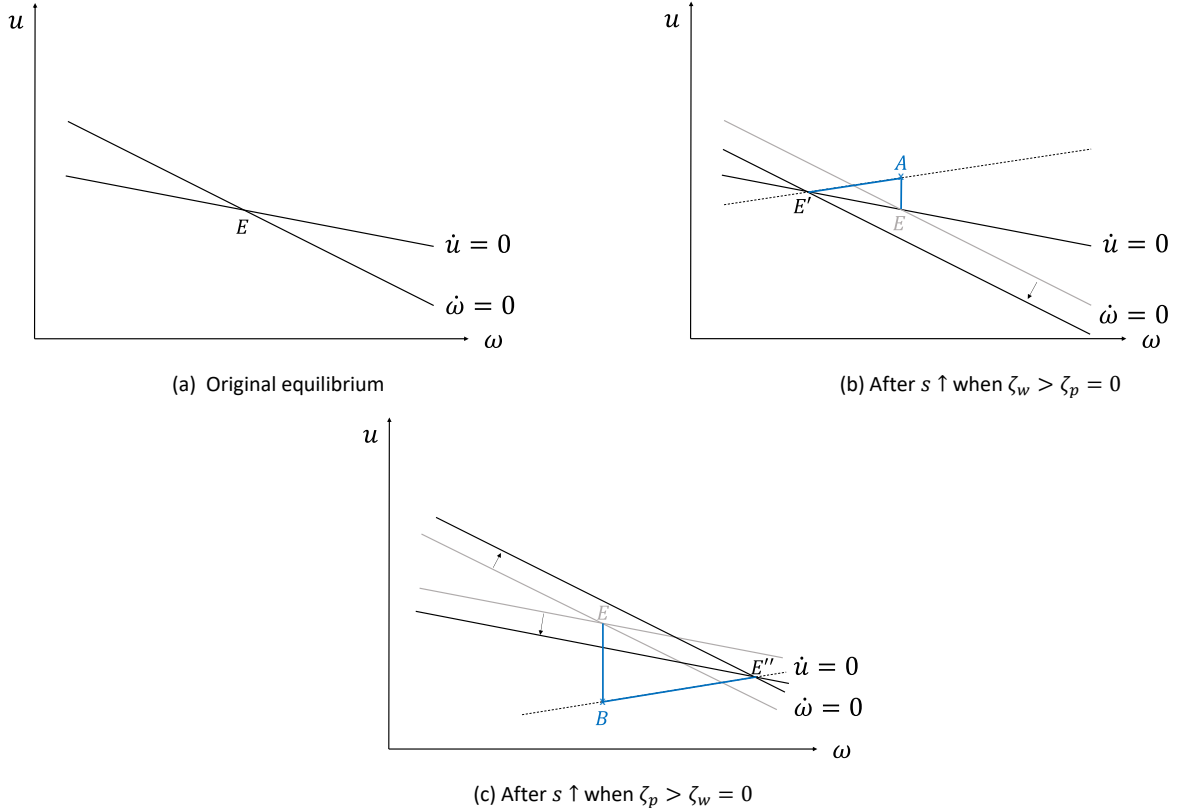


Figure 6: Phase diagrams for $\tilde{k}_p < k_w = \phi_u = 0$.

If $\zeta_p > \zeta_w = 0$ (implying that only firms carry direct exposure to the energy shock, Figure 6c) workers see the unemployment rate fall and their real wage rise – again stemming from negative pass-through, now on the part of firms.

This illustrates how markup countercyclicality implies “burden concentration and multiplication”, instead of burden sharing between workers and firms.

Appendix B

Lemma 1. *The REE is determinate if $\det(J) < 0$.*

Proof. Our model can be cast into the following state-space form:

$$\begin{bmatrix} \dot{y}_t \\ \dot{\pi}_t \\ \dot{\pi}_{w,t} \\ \dot{\omega}_t \end{bmatrix} = \underbrace{\begin{bmatrix} \phi_y & (\phi_\pi - 1) & 0 & 0 \\ -\frac{\eta_p}{\psi_p} & \varrho & 0 & -\frac{\varepsilon_p(0)-1}{\psi_p} \\ -\frac{(\varepsilon_w(0)-1)(1+\theta)}{\psi_w} - \frac{\eta_w}{\psi_w} & 0 & \varrho & \frac{\varepsilon_w(0)-1}{\psi_w} \\ 0 & -1 & 1 & 0 \end{bmatrix}}_J \begin{bmatrix} y_t \\ \pi_t \\ \pi_{w,t} \\ \omega_t \end{bmatrix}. \quad (35)$$

This matrix structure is like that for the standard EHL-model, except for the blue terms: they are equal to 0 for the standard model, but do feature here because of the cyclicity of frictionless markups when $\eta_p, \eta_w \neq 0$.

First consider the case where $\phi_y = 0$. Given that (35) is a four-dimensional system, and given that the determinant of J is equal to the product of its eigenvalues, $\det(J) < 0$ either implies three positive eigenvalues and one negative one, or three negative eigenvalues and one positive one. Since the model has three forward-looking variables (y, π, π_w), determinacy requires three positive (“unstable”) eigenvalues. Having $\det(J) > 0$ can thus never deliver determinacy, as it implies all eigenvalues being positive, all of them being negative, or a situation of two positive/two negative – all of which are inconsistent with the eigenvalue-requirement of three positive/one negative.

Now that we have ruled out $\det(J) > 0$ as a possibility, we still need to show that $\det(J) < 0$ delivers three positive eigenvalues, and one negative one (as opposed to the other way round). From Descartes’ Rule of Signs we know that the number of positive eigenvalues is *at most* the number of sign changes in the sequence of the characteristic polynomial’s coefficients. The characteristic polynomial of J reads:

$$\lambda^4 - b_3\lambda^3 + b_2\lambda^2 - b_1\lambda - b_0 = 0,$$

with:

$$\begin{aligned}
b_3 &= 2\varrho, \\
b_2 &= (\phi_\pi - 1) \frac{\eta_p}{\psi_p} + \varrho^2 - \left(\frac{\varepsilon_p(0) - 1}{\psi_p} + \frac{\varepsilon_w(0) - 1}{\psi_w} \right), \\
b_1 &= (\phi_\pi - 1) \frac{\eta_p}{\psi_p} \varrho - \varrho \left(\frac{\varepsilon_p(0) - 1}{\psi_p} + \frac{\varepsilon_w(0) - 1}{\psi_w} \right), \\
b_0 &= (\phi_\pi - 1) \left[\frac{\varepsilon_w(0) - 1}{\psi_w} \frac{\eta_p}{\psi_p} + \frac{\varepsilon_p(0) - 1}{\psi_p} \frac{(\varepsilon_w(0) - 1)(1 + \theta) + \eta_w}{\psi_w} \right].
\end{aligned}$$

Note that it is obvious that $b_3 > 0$ and $b_0 > 0$ (with b_0 being the negative of the determinant of J , i.e., $b_0 = -\det(J)$). The coefficients b_2 and b_1 cannot be signed unambiguously, but there are only three possibilities: (i) both $b_1, b_2 > 0$; (ii) both $b_1, b_2 < 0$; or (iii) $b_1 < 0$ and $b_2 > 0$. The remaining option ($b_1 > 0$ and $b_2 < 0$) is not possible, since $b_2 < 0$ immediately implies $b_1 < 0$, which puts us back in case (ii). To see this, note that $b_1 > 0$ requires $(\phi_\pi - 1) \frac{\eta_p}{\psi_p} > \left(\frac{\varepsilon_p(0) - 1}{\psi_p} + \frac{\varepsilon_w(0) - 1}{\psi_w} \right)$ while $b_2 < 0$ requires $(\phi_\pi - 1) \frac{\eta_p}{\psi_p} + \varrho^2 < \left(\frac{\varepsilon_p(0) - 1}{\psi_p} + \frac{\varepsilon_w(0) - 1}{\psi_w} \right)$. But since $(\phi_\pi - 1) \frac{\eta_p}{\psi_p} < (\phi_\pi - 1) \frac{\eta_p}{\psi_p} + \varrho^2$, this implies $b_1 < b_2$ thus yielding a contraction and ruling out the remaining combination of $b_1 > 0$ and $b_2 < 0$.

Note that in all three possible cases ((i), (ii), and (iii)), the number of sign changes in the sequence of the characteristic polynomial's coefficients always equals three. By Descartes' Rule, this means that there are at most three positive eigenvalues – yet it does not rule out fewer than three (e.g., one).

But we can also apply the corollary of Descartes' Rule, which states that the number of negative roots equals the number of sign changes after multiplying the coefficients of odd-powered terms by -1 , *or fewer than it by an even number*. After multiplying the odd-powered terms by -1 , we are always left with only one sign change, meaning that the original polynomial has only one negative root (as “fewer than it by an even number” is not possible). Consequently, it follows that $\det(J) < 0$ implies that the model has three positive eigenvalues, and one negative one – yielding saddle-point stability.

If $\phi_y > 0$ the proof has the same structure, but the analysis is slightly more involved. In that case the coefficients of the characteristic polynomial are equal to:

$$\begin{aligned}
b_3 &= \phi_y + 2\varrho, \\
b_2 &= (\phi_\pi - 1)\frac{\eta_p}{\psi_p} + \varrho^2 + 2\phi_y\varrho - \left(\frac{\varepsilon_p(0) - 1}{\psi_p} + \frac{\varepsilon_w(0) - 1}{\psi_w} \right), \\
b_1 &= \phi_y\varrho^2 + (\phi_\pi - 1)\frac{\eta_p}{\psi_p}\varrho - (\phi_y + \varrho) \left(\frac{\varepsilon_p(0) - 1}{\psi_p} + \frac{\varepsilon_w(0) - 1}{\psi_w} \right), \\
b_0 &= (\phi_\pi - 1) \left[\frac{\varepsilon_w(0) - 1}{\psi_w} \frac{\eta_p}{\psi_p} + \frac{\varepsilon_p(0) - 1}{\psi_p} \frac{(\varepsilon_w(0) - 1)(1 + \theta) + \eta_w}{\psi_w} \right] - \phi_y\varrho \left[\frac{\varepsilon_p(0) - 1}{\psi_p} + \frac{\varepsilon_w(0) - 1}{\psi_w} \right].
\end{aligned}$$

As before, we need to rule out the case where $b_1 > 0$ and $b_2 < 0$ (as that combination would produce three negative eigenvalues and one positive one – the exact opposite of what we need). This now requires:

$$\phi_\pi > 1 - \frac{2\varrho^2 + 2\phi_y\varrho + \varrho^3}{\eta_p/\psi_p} \quad \text{for } \eta_p > 0, \quad (36)$$

$$\phi_\pi < 1 - \frac{2\varrho^2 + 2\phi_y\varrho + \varrho^3}{\eta_p/\psi_p} \quad \text{for } \eta_p < 0. \quad (37)$$

These form additional determinacy conditions (complementing (25) and (26) from the main text).■

In practice it however turns out that – for all reasonable parameter values – (25) and (26) are actually stricter than (36) and (37), meaning that if the former are satisfied, the latter will automatically hold as well (except in the extreme flexible price limit case where $\psi_p \searrow 0$).

Appendix C

This appendix details the data underlying our empirical exercise in Section 4. There, we estimate the degree of price markup cyclical by estimating equation (34) of the main text. All of its inputs are readily available from the Penn World Tables (PWT, version 10.01) which contains data through 2019; for most countries, the data start in 1970. The only variable that requires some non-trivial calculations is R , the Hall-Jorgenson rental price of capital. It can be calculated from the PWT as follows:²⁴

$$R = (IRR + DEPR) \cdot INVDEFL,$$

²⁴We thank Robert Inklaar for his help on this.

where “*IRR*” is the internal rate of return (directly available in the PWT under the variable name “irr”), “*DEPR*” the depreciation rate (directly available in the PWT under the variable name “delta”), while “*INVDEFL*” is the deflator for investment. The latter can be calculated from the National Accounts data accompanying the PWT, as v_gfcf/q_gfcf (i.e., the value of gross fixed capital formation divided by its volume).

References

- Acharya, Viral, Matteo Crosignani, Tim Eisert, and Christian Eufinger (2023), “How do supply shocks to inflation generalize? Evidence from the pandemic era in Europe”, CEPR Discussion Paper No. 18530.
- Afrouzi, Hassan and Luigi Caloi (2023), “Endogenous firm competition and the cyclicity of markups”, *Review of Economics and Statistics*, forthcoming.
- Albagli, Elías, Gabriela Contreras, Matías Tapia, and Juan M. Wlasiuk (2022), “Earnings cyclicity of new and continuing jobs: The role of tenure and transition length”, *Labour Economics*, 78, 102242.
- Angeletos, George-Marios, Fabrice Collard, and Harris Dellas (2020), “Business-cycle anatomy”, *American Economic Review*, 110, pp. 3030-3070.
- Arce, Oscar, Elke Hahn, and Gerrit Koester (2023), “How tit-for-tat inflation can make everyone poorer”, ECB Blog, March 30, 2023.
- Beaudry, Paul, Thomas J. Carter, and Amartya Lahiri (2022), “Looking through supply shocks versus controlling inflation expectations: Understanding the central bank dilemma”, Bank of Canada Working Paper No. 2022-41.
- Bianchi, Francesco, Giovanni Nicolo, and Dongho Song (2023) “Inflation and real activity over the business cycle”, Finance and Economics Discussion Series 2023-038. Washington: Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System.
- Bilbiie, Florin O., Fabio Ghironi, and Marc J. Melitz (2012), “Endogenous entry, product variety, and business cycles”, *Journal of Political Economy*, 120, pp. 304-345.
- Bilbiie, Florin O. and Diego Känzig (2023), “Greed? Profits, inflation, and aggregate demand”, CEPR Discussion Paper No. 18385.
- Bils, Mark (1989), “Pricing in a customer market”, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 104, pp. 699-718.
- Bils, Mark and James A. Kahn (2000), “What inventory behavior tells us about business cycles”, *American Economic Review*, 90, pp. 458-481.
- Bils, Mark, Peter J. Klenow, and Benjamin A. Malin (2017), “Resurrecting the role of the product market wedge in recessions”, *American Economic Review*, 108, pp. 1118-1146.

Blanchard, Olivier J. (1986), “The wage price spiral”, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 101, pp. 543-566.

Burstein, Ariel, Vasco M. Carvalho, and Basile Grassi (2020), “Bottom-up markup fluctuations”, NBER Working Paper No. 27958.

Calvo, Guillermo A. (1983), “Staggered prices in a utility-maximizing framework”, *Journal of Monetary Economics*, 12, pp. 383-398.

Carney, Mark (2017), “Lambda”, Speech given at the London School of Economics.

Christiano, Lawrence J., Martin Eichenbaum, and Charles L. Evans (2005), “Nominal rigidities and the dynamic effects of a shock to monetary policy”, *Journal of Political Economy*, 113, pp. 1-45.

De Loecker, Jan, Jan Eeckhout, and Gabriel Unger (2020), “The rise of market power and the macroeconomic implications”, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 135, pp. 561-644.

De Loecker, Jan and Frederic Warzynski (2012), “Markups and firm-level export status”, *American Economic Review*, 102, pp. 2437-2471.

Edmond, Chris and Laura Veldkamp (2009), “Income dispersion and counter-cyclical markups”, *Journal of Monetary Economics*, 56, pp. 791-804.

Erceg, Christopher J., Dale W. Henderson, and Andrew T. Levin (2000), “Optimal monetary policy with staggered wage and price contracts”, *Journal of Monetary Economics*, 46, pp. 281-313.

Eyster, Erik, Kristóf Madarász, and Pascal Michaillat (2020), “Pricing under fairness concerns”, *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 19, pp. 1853-1898.

Galí, Jordi (1994), “Monopolistic competition, business cycles, and the composition of aggregate demand”, *Journal of Economic Theory*, 63, pp. 73-96.

Galí, Jordi (2008), *Monetary Policy, Inflation, and the Business Cycle*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.

Galí, Jordi, Mark Gertler, and J. David López-Salido (2007), “Markups, gaps, and the welfare costs of business fluctuations”, *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 89, pp. 44-59.

Gertler, Mark, Christopher Huckfeldt, and Antonella Trigari (2020), “Unemployment fluctuations, match quality, and the wage cyclicity of new hires”, *Review of Economic Studies*, 87, pp. 1876-1914.

Gilchrist, Simon, Raphael Schoenle, Jae Sim, and Egon Zakrajšek (2017), “Inflation dynamics during the financial crisis”, *American Economic Review*, 107, pp. 785-823.

Glover, Andrew, José Mustre-del-Río, and Alice von Ende-Becker (2023), “How much have record corporate profits contributed to recent inflation?”, *Federal Reserve Bank of Kansas Economic Review*, 108, pp. 23-35.

Haefke, Christian, Marcus Sonntag, and Thijs van Rens (2013), “Wage rigidity and job creation”, *Journal of Monetary Economics*, 60, pp. 887-899.

Hall, Robert E. (1988), “The relation between price and marginal cost in U.S. industry”, *Journal of Political Economy*, 96, pp. 921-947.

Hall, Robert E. (2009), “Reconciling cyclical movements in the marginal value of time and the marginal product of labor”, *Journal of Political Economy*, 117, pp. 281-323.

Hall, Robert E. (2018), “New evidence on the markup of prices over marginal costs and the role of mega-firms in the US economy”, NBER Working Paper No. 24574.

Hamilton, James D. (2018), “Why you should never use the Hodrick-Prescott filter”, *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 100, pp. 831-843.

Harrod, Roy (1936), *The Trade Cycle*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Haskel, Jonathan, Christopher Martin, and Ian Small (1995), “Price, marginal cost and the business cycle”, *Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics*, 57, pp. 25-41.

Hong, Sungki (2019), “Customer capital, markup cyclicalities, and amplification”, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis Working Paper 2017-033.

Jaimovich, Nir and Max Floetotto (2008), “Firm dynamics, markup variations, and the business cycle”, *Journal of Monetary Economics*, 55, pp. 1238-1252.

Kalecki, Michał (1938), “The determinants of distribution of the national income”, *Econometrica*, 6, pp. 97-112.

Karabarbounis, Loukas (2014), “The labor wedge: MRS vs. MPN”, *Review of Economic Dynamics*, 17, pp. 206-223.

Keynes, John M. (1939), “Relative movements of real wages and output”, *Economic Journal*, 49, pp. 34-51.

Kryvtsov, Oleksiy and Virgiliu Midrigan (2013), “Inventories, markups, and real rigidities in menu cost models”, *Review of Economic Studies*, 80, pp. 249-276.

Lagarde, Christine (2023), “Breaking the persistence of inflation”, Speech at the ECB Forum on Central Banking, Sintra.

Layard, Richard and Stephen Nickell (1986), “Unemployment in Britain”, *Economica*, 53, pp. S121-S169.

Layard, Richard, Stephen Nickell, and Richard Jackman (1991), *Unemployment: Macroeconomic Performance and the Labour Market*, Oxford UK: Oxford University Press.

Lorenzoni, Guido and Iván Werning (2023a), “Wage price spirals”, *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity*, Fall 2023.

Lorenzoni, Guido and Iván Werning (2023b), “Inflation is conflict”, mimeo, MIT.

Lydon, Reamonn and Matija Lozej (2018), “Flexibility of new hires’ earnings in Ire-

land”, *Labour Economics*, 53, pp. 112-127.

Nekarda, Christopher J. and Valerie A. Ramey (2020), “The cyclical behavior of the price-cost markup”, *Journal of Money, Credit and Banking*, 52, pp. 319-353.

Oliveira Martins, Joaquim and Stefano Scarpetta (1999), “The levels and cyclical behaviour of mark-ups across countries and market structures”, OECD Economics Department Working Papers No. 213.

Phelps, Edmund S. and Sidney G. Winter (1970), “Optimal price policy under atomistic competition”, in Edmund S. Phelps (ed.), *Macroeconomic Foundations of Employment and Inflation Theory*, W. W. Norton Co., New York.

Pigou, Arthur C. (1927), *Industrial Fluctuations*, London: Macmillan & Co.

Pill, Huw (2023), “Inflation persistence and monetary policy”, Speech given on the occasion of the ICMB Lecture, Graduate Institute, Geneva.

Pissarides, Christopher A. (2000), *Equilibrium Unemployment Theory*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Portier, Franck (1995), “Business formation and cyclical markups in the French business cycle”, *Annales d’Économie et de Statistique*, 37/38, pp. 411-440.

Qiu, Zhesheng and José-Víctor Ríos-Rull (2022), “Procyclical productivity in new Keynesian models”, NBER Working Paper No. 29769.

Roberts, John M. (1995), “New Keynesian economics and the Phillips curve”, *Journal of Money, Credit, and Banking*, 27, pp. 975-984.

Roeger, Werner (1995), “Can imperfect competition explain the difference between primal and dual productivity measures? Estimates for U.S. manufacturing”, *Journal of Political Economy*, 103, pp. 316-330.

Rotemberg, Julio J. (1982), “Monopolistic price adjustment and aggregate output”, *Review of Economic Studies*, 49, pp. 517-531.

Rotemberg, Julio J. and Michael Woodford (1992), “Oligopolistic pricing and the effects of aggregate demand on economic activity”, *Journal of Political Economy*, 100, pp. 1153-1207.

Rotemberg, Julio J. and Michael Woodford (1999), “The cyclical behavior of prices and costs”, in: John B. Taylor and Michael Woodford (eds.), *Handbook of Macroeconomics*, Vol. 1B, Amsterdam: North-Holland.

Rowthorn, Robert J. (1977), “Conflict, inflation and money”, *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 1, pp. 215-239.

Shapiro, Carl and Joseph E. Stiglitz (1984), “Equilibrium unemployment as a worker discipline device”, *American Economic Review*, 74, pp. 433-444.

Steinsson, Jón (2003), “Optimal monetary policy in an economy with inflation persistence”, *Journal of Monetary Economics*, 50, pp. 1425-1456.

Visser, Jelle (1998), “Two Cheers for Corporatism, One for the Market: Industrial Relations, Wage Moderation and Job Growth in the Netherlands”, *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 36, pp. 269-292.

Weber, Isabella M. and Evan Wasner (2023), “Sellers’ inflation, profits and conflict: Why can large firms hike prices in an emergency?”, UMass Amherst Working Paper No. 2023-02.